

NICOTINA
Adventures of a cigarette smuggler

TRACEY LONDON

Nicotina

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**For
Helen and Frank**

IN mid-September, a mahogany hull slid quietly into an English river and a ship was born. It does not matter now that, after many years, she lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean. She had her day and, having had it, she committed suicide and the sea closed over her, so that she should not live out her last years rotting and neglected as do so many of her contemporaries.

This book is an account of the life of that ship, built for the Royal Navy but converted, at the end of the war, into a private yacht. She then joined the ranks of the Nicotine Navy, the fleet of ships which smuggled cigarettes from Tangier into Italy.

For reasons of discretion and because I do not wish to cause embarrassment to any of those who have since repented of their ways, all surnames have been omitted, all Christian names changed and the names of the Nicotina's various sister ships have likewise been altered.

To those of us who feel no contrition for our sins, I hope that this book will provide amusement and revive recollections of the times, both good and bad, of which it tells.

T. L.

London.

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White Ensign to Red Duster

THE *Nicotina* lay at anchor, shrouded in darkness and silent. No light showed from her, not even so much as a glowing cigarette end which might betray her presence, so close in to land. Only very faint starlight revealed some vicious looking rocks emerging from the heaving water not far distant.

All about her was a tense, absorbed air of purpose. Its fountain head was the skipper, watchful and still on the bridge, and it flowed from one member of her crew to the next in a chain of searching eyes and alert ears. My rope soled shoes made the faintest of shuffles when I moved and the only other sound was the gentle swish of water along the hull. When I accidentally dropped my lighter, with which I had been fidgeting, the clatter seemed as loud as a rifle report, and the skipper swore sibilantly at me.

Faintly, at first, we heard the sound of approaching engines. Our engineer, standing on the companion ladder to the engine room with his head just clearing the hatch coaming, recognised one of them immediately and whispered to me that here were the contact boats, at last. Then, as I turned towards the bridge, anticipating orders, I saw the wink and blin' of a signal being flashed in our direction, and our answering acknowledgement. Slowly and as quietly as possible, two small fishing vessels closed in alongside us and immediately there was a practised surge of activity, as a human chain formed and cases of cigarettes began to pass from the ship to the fishing vessels. Only the skipper and the engineer never left their positions, the former high on the exposed bridge, and the latter within arm's reach of the engine controls. The only conversation was a subdued whispering in Italian as the cases were checked over the side.

Seizing cases from the man on my right and passing them mechanically to another on my left, I reflected that the two contact boats were very small and inadequate for the bulky contraband which

they were loading; it looked as if they would need to make a lot of journeys to and fro, in order to remove all the cargo. That, in fact, was exactly what they did, disappearing round the rocky corner on the starboard bow each time they were fully laden, and returning in a remarkably short time, for the next consignment.

Each time the boats left, and the hum of their engines receded into the darkness, we were left with a slowly mounting anxiety which nagged at us all. The job was going too slowly. It was essential, because we dared not return to this rendezvous the following night, that all the cargo we had aboard be removed; yet the night hours were passing quickly and there were still some two hundred cases of cigarettes left aboard the ship.

Suddenly we heard the approach of a different vessel—something much noisier and faster than either of our contact boats. Anticipating that this was trouble, I expected to hear the skipper roar for the engines to be started at once, but he made no move. Very rapidly the newcomer to the nefarious scene swept alongside and a man in Italian customs uniform whipped smartly aboard the *Nicotina* and on to the bridge, and spoke in a low, hurried voice, to the skipper. Their brief conference concluded, he jumped into his own boat again and departed as quickly as he had come.

The explanation of this lightning visitation was quite straightforward. We were being warned to speed up the operation as it would soon be light. The local customs, in deference to the size of their bribe, were anxiously co-operating in order to bring our work to a successful conclusion.

Again and again the fishing boats trundled consignments of cases ashore, until there remained only enough for one more load. As they drew alongside to take it off, the first ruby streaks of light were appearing, far out to sea. Sweating and exhausted, we fairly bundled the cargo over the side but, for the second time, the customs launch came out. They were so excited, by this time, that they dispensed with all caution and bawled at us to get the hell out of it. As the last few cases were being transhipped, our engines were started and we began heaving up our anchor.

The chain slowly grew taut as two of the crew strained at the windlass, then it stopped and refused to budge. The anchor had jammed on the bottom and declined to break out and come to the surface.

The skipper pivoted the ship round 180 degrees and two more men tried their hands at the windlass but, despite manœuvring and four men getting to grips with the windlass, nothing happened. It appeared that we were there for good.

All this time the customs launch had been fluttering around us in agitated circles, and the noise and disturbance should, by rights, have awakened the whole Gulf of Genoa.

Finally, when it was already too light for safety, the decision was taken to abandon the anchor altogether. Setting the engines to full power and swinging the bows out to sea, we rode straight over it. There was a violent jerk and then the broken end of chain flew up over the bows and thwacked down on the deck with a sharp detonation.

No time was lost in putting several miles between the coast and ourselves, the engines continuing to run at full pitch until we had cleared Italian territorial waters, when we throttled down to cruising speed. . . .

I never saw the inside of an Italian gaol. But for the good fortune which saw fit to protect me with a first-class ship and a skilled, resourceful skipper during my smuggling life, it is certain that I should have been intimately acquainted with one or two of those institutions. It is said that the devil looks after his own, and I scraped by without the chastening retribution of such an incarceration.

Being, therefore, in an unpunished state, I can advocate the cigarette smuggler's life as the most satisfying experience that has ever come my way, to date. I only wish that I was still engaged in it. But times have changed and I am told that, nowadays, it is a different and really dangerous affair. Not that it was any too genteel a business a few years ago.

Since it is necessary to fill in a few details as to how a common-or-garden shorthand typist came to be involved in the unlikely pursuit of second engineer in a smuggling vessel, it may as well be done now, and thus be done with. At the same time, *Nicotina* herself can be formally introduced, for this book purports to be her biography.

Rakish, elegant and chock full of character, she rolled into my life, commandeered it for some three years, and completely dominated me. But her nature was not of the all-take-no-give type. She taught me many things which, even in my early twenties, I had not previously assimilated. Endurance and discipline were only two of these

matters and she gave me, into the bargain, a set of values which became my yardstick because they had been acquired through experience and not parrot-wise.

She was a "B" class Fairmile, 112 feet long, with fine, flaring bows and a transom stern. Powered by two American, Hall Scott Defender engines of 650 h.p. each, she was a prototype of her class and spent the war years in the ranks of the Royal Navy. When the tumult and the shouting had died, she was dumped at Gillingham, still wearing her naval paint and her wartime number, M.L. XXX, and classed as "surplus to requirements." But the heyday of her life was yet to come, in the form of a transfer from the Royal Navy to the Nicotine Navy.

About the time that M.L. XXX lay at Gillingham, desolate and abandoned, I had parted company with the Foreign Office, for which I had worked during the latter years of the war, and had embarked upon my first civilian-type job. It was natural that I should gravitate towards the motor trade, since anything capable of self-propulsion, whether on land, sea or in the air, had always held a great fascination for me.

I quickly realised that my new boss, whom I shall call Mike, was a man of unusual character. Taciturn would perhaps be too strong a word, but he was an uncommunicative person on the whole, and seldom made casual conversation.

He was a real glutton for work. If he was not out buying or selling cars, he was in the garage dickering about with their innards, or washing and polishing them. Always restless and active, he slaved at his business as if his very life depended on it.

In physical appearance he was of medium height and powerful build, with fine-textured, dark brown hair and blue eyes. His regular-featured face had a withdrawn expression which was habitual. Strangely enough, his sense of humour could be excellent, on the rare occasions when he gave vent to it, but generally he was serious and self-contained.

Having become acclimatised to his unpredictable nature, in the course of a few months, I was not unduly surprised when Mike announced, with customary brevity, that he intended to buy a boat. At the time, I assumed that he meant some small, sailing dinghy with which to amuse himself on the coast somewhere. It was with unbelieving eyes that I then caught sight of an Admiralty list of ex-

naval ships up for tender, lying on his desk. One entry was heavily underscored, and the words which riveted my attention were "112 feet in length." Nothing less than a young battleship was Mike's idea of a boat.

The look of incredulity on my face prompted a few more sentences of terse explanation from him, to the effect that he had had enough of life in post-war England and wanted to go abroad. In planning this, the dominant factor had been the impossibility of taking any money out of the country, in hard cash, and he had concluded that the only alternative was to take his money out in kind—in a ship—right under his feet.

That he knew nothing about the sea or ships had not entered into his considerations. In actual fact he had been in the Air Force, but he was a man of many parts, engineer, carpenter, plumber and general handyman, and he figured that he could earn enough of a living in some kind of charter work to keep the ship going and, at the same time, see all he wanted of foreign places.

The day he went to view the ship I bought an evening paper and started scanning the columns of Situations Vacant. There seemed little doubt that I was going to need another job in the foreseeable future.

Within a very short space of time Mike had put in a bid for the ship, the bid was accepted, and she became his property. When her certificate of registration as a private yacht arrived in the office, I made tentative enquiries as to how long it would be before I had to take alternative employment.

Mike displayed genuine surprise at the question. He told me that there was no necessity for me to leave but that, if I wished, I could sign on as a crew member and work in the ship.

I went home that evening and 'nought long and hard about this extraordinary development. At face value, it looked like a golden opportunity for adventure, travel and an escape from the thousand and one restrictions, the rationing, and the general hangover of war prevailing at the time. I was young and I visualised a future consisting entirely of sunny skies, calm, blue seas and a life led exclusively in glorious glamourcolour.

I conducted a cold appraisal of my existing circumstances and my future prospects, and this resulted in swaying my inclination very strongly in favour of going with the ship. Romance? None—I had

just broken off my engagement to a Canadian. Home? A tatty, allegedly-furnished bed-sitter with a gas fire of which I was terrified because it was violently explosive. Finance? Nil, except my weekly salary; in a fit of over-enthusiastic independence I had turned down the offer of an allowance from my family. Professional future? Not inspiring; I was only trained for shorthand and typing, and my heart had never been in it.

There were only two factors which I could honestly set against all these considerations. One was that I had been taking singing lessons, with a view to going on the stage. I had sunk a heavy percentage of my weekly pittance in this project, to the vast improvement of my waistline and other proportions. It seemed an appalling waste to drop my training now.

The other, more serious consideration was the premonition of certain parental disapproval. I knew, with uncomfortable anticipation, that the project would be gone into in great detail. Such questions as whether the ship was seaworthy, was the skipper fully qualified, was there a doctor aboard this yacht, how many other females were there aboard, what were we going to do, and who was this man that I was working for, anyway, were bound to be asked.

But the outcome of my deliberations was inevitable. During that evening's pondering, I experienced my first, slight attack of sea fever and the final decision to take the plunge, perhaps literally, was made. The next morning I told Mike that I would like to go with the ship. He merely nodded and warned me, as an afterthought, that it would entail working on the ship at week-ends until such time as she was in a fit state to go foreign. Had I known, at the time, what I was letting myself in for, in the way of hard work, storms, fire at sea, attempted piracy and contraband, my decision might have been otherwise, but I doubt that, even now.

Thus it was that I found myself, one chilly autumn Saturday, perched in the back of a truck amongst a multitude of miscellaneous stores, *en route* for Gillingham. Mike's younger brother, Bill, had joined the expedition. Resembling Mike in many respects, though not as tall and fairer of hair, he was a resourceful person and much more approachable than his brother.

The three of us, together with all the equipment, were ferried out to M.L. XXX by the dockyard motor boat, the only casualty being the loss overboard of a stirrup pump. Bill had misjudged the distance

between the boat and the dock. There was a resounding splash accompanied by vociferous protestations from the man in the boat, who was drenched.

Once aboard, Mike took it upon himself to conduct me to the bows and inform me that this was the sharp end—the end that went forward. Due to the prevailing state of dereliction, I had my doubts as to whether we should ever go at all, either forwards or backwards.

We camped out as best we could in the wardroom and, while the boys occupied themselves in the engine room, I assumed the role of domesticity and dealt with such matters as heating, food and sleeping arrangements. Then I took myself on a tour of investigation, poking and prying into every corner of the ship for hours. I ended up in the wheelhouse, standing at the wheel and gazing out over the grey, muddy water, past the long lines of abandoned ships to where the November sky met the sea. But, as my hands rested on the wheel, I had my second attack of sea fever and I no longer saw that dark sky, or the dreary waste of water, or the other discarded ships.

I saw the open ocean before us, green, sparkling, vivid with light. I saw, on the horizon, pure blue sky coming down on to jade water; I felt the warmth of sunshine on my skin, the sweep of wind through my hair and the pulse of a living ship beneath my feet. All these things I knew before they happened because I felt the ship reach out to me and touch me. And so I came to love her. . . .

The first night spent on board was a disturbed business of fitful sleep. I was not accustomed to sleeping in a hard, narrow bunk, fully dressed and half frozen. Worse, at some stage during the night I awoke from my intermittent dozings to find that I had rolled hard up against the portholes. I tried to roll back again but found that it was uphill work. It seemed as if the whole ship was leaning over at an angle. I switched on my torch and found, to my alarm, that this actually was the case. Adopting the "half-open penknife" position, which was the only possible means of getting in and out of the bunk, I dropped to the floor. This woke Bill, and we crawled up on deck, crab-fashion. All round us was a vast bed of mud and the ship had settled herself comfortably down in it with a heavy list to port of at least forty-five degrees. From the total absence of the water which had previously surrounded us, we were led to suppose that the area was beset by tides, a fact which had not occurred to any of us before.

This first weekend set the pattern for many more. Mike bought a

dinghy, so that we were quite independent of the shore and, except for food which we carted down with us each week, we had all the necessities of existence on board. There were batteries and a small charging plant for lighting, adequate fresh water, coal in the bunkers for the wardroom stove and a couple of primus stoves for cooking.

The primary object of these weekends was to get the ship into a fit state to be moved on to the Thames, where Mike had found moorings for her within an hour's drive of London. This boiled down to putting the engines in order, but it was many weary weeks before the job was done. After an initial look at the engine room I avoided it carefully. The place was a mass of dials, pipes, wires and machinery and the engines themselves were very excitable and prone to exuding sheets of flame at the slightest provocation.

One afternoon, in the short lull between washing up after tea and starting to prepare supper, I came across several large, flat books, stuffed into a locker beneath a wardroom bunk. They proved to be the ship's log books, though how they had come to be left on board was anybody's guess. Every detail of her naval existence was there, including the extraordinary coincidence that her launching had taken place on the very date of Mike's birthday. There were frequent alcoholic entries, recording the issue of rum, and there was an interesting occasion when a torpedo had passed clean under the ship and continued about its business without causing any inconvenience.

A typewritten report dropped out of one of the books, giving details of a member of the crew whose body had been found, many days after he had been reported missing, floating in a dock. The report stated that suicide had been suspected and, in the fullness of time, I came to know that there were occasions when such a course might well seem an attractive alternative to endurance of the treatment that ship could mete out in rough seas. I regret to record that we immediately assumed the presence of a ghost in the ship, officially named him Hector, and conveniently apportioned him with the blame for everything that went wrong.

We were to be granted an allowance of 200 gallons of high octane petrol for the purpose of moving the ship; but great was our delight when we found that the Navy had left the starboard inner fuel tank full. The filler cap in the deck was jammed solid, but it goes without saying that Mike and Bill shifted it. We spent a freezing four hours, one vile and villainous night, pumping half of it into another

tank to level up the ship, conducting the operation surreptitiously so that nobody would deprive us of our precious, ill-gotten fuel. What with the hose coiling itself in all directions across the snow-covered deck, the bitter cold and the numerous obstructions over which we were constantly tripping in the darkness, it was an ordeal of nightmare quality, but it was worth it. Petrol rationing was very tight at the time.

The fact that the tides regularly left the ship sitting down on the mud provided a good opportunity for having an inspection of her bottom. The problem was how to walk around on the mud without sinking into it. Mike solved this one by manufacturing two "walking boards," pieces of planking fixed together to provide platforms some three feet long and about eighteen inches wide, with a rope attached to each. By standing on one and throwing the other down in front of him, then stepping on to it and dragging up the first one, he was able to examine the whole hull thoroughly.

Towards the end of December we were ready to move. For the adventure we had a crew of five on board; Mike, Bill, myself, a friend of Mike's, one Jeff, inexperienced like ourselves but willing, and a qualified pilot whom we had engaged to take us out of the Medway, round the corner, so to speak, and up the Thames. He was a Mr. Wilson, a tall man of about forty, with fair hair and bright, blue eyes set in a sea-and-sun-tanned face. He arrived on board in time for lunch on a wintry Saturday just after Christmas. It had been snowing hard and everything wore a thick layer of glistening white which contrasted sharply with the dirty, grey water.

When Mr. Wilson was satisfied that we were ready to go, Mike started the engines, lines were cast off, fenders hauled in and, with great care, we sidled away from the trot and into open water. We had taken particular care to see that our dinghy was lifted out of the water and stowed in its cradle, on deck. The week before, we had watched somebody else moving from their trot and their departure was made memorable by the fact that they had omitted to bring their dinghy aboard. It was lying at the stern of the ship and, as soon as the propellers began to turn, it was sucked down into the maelstrom of wash behind the ship to reappear, seconds later, in the form of matchwood, and remarkably small pieces of matchwood, at that.

Thin fingers of excitement probed my stomach as we began to move in earnest. Not only was the ship under her own power, but

she was getting away from all the other "numbers," at last, she was ceasing to be just a "number" herself and she would now become a ship in her own right, with a name, and London for her home port. She already had her own personality.

Some time later we found ourselves running into fog. Mr. Wilson peered at it, trying to estimate how bad it might become, but decided that, for the time being, we could continue on our way. We found a large ship making her way up the Thames to London and followed her. We could just see her stern light, but that was the only thing we could see. The rest of the world was a blank. The noises, on the other hand, were quite extraordinary. All sorts of strange hootings, blasts, honks, whistles and ringings emerged from the fog. They conveyed little to me, but it was obvious that we were in the thick of a good deal of shipping. About another hour and a half later, the fog lifted a little and visibility improved. We could discern the stern of the ship we were following quite clearly.

Then, without warning, a huge tanker loomed up and appeared to be bearing down directly on us. Mr. Wilson spun the wheel hard over and rang for the engines to be throttled up in a wild scream of maximum revs. The hull juddered through and through as we began to swing off our course. The tanker leaned over us, second by second I expected to hear the crash and feel the icy water engulfing us, and then the tanker slid past and we were safe.

I glanced at Mr. Wilson, at the wheel. He was bringing the ship back on to her course quite calmly and he merely remarked that the tanker had been in the wrong, but that it was the old story of the stronger and the weaker.

As the early, winter darkness began to clamp down, we decided not to venture on through the fog but, instead, to tie up for the night at the first suitable mooring we could find.

To this day I do not know where we were, or even whether it was on the north bank of the Thames or the south. We moored alongside a rickety, wooden jetty, blanketed in cold, crawling fog and treacherous with ice. A visit to the nearest alehouse was suggested and acted upon with alacrity. I shuffled my way nervously along the jetty; it was perilously narrow and there were no rails. Once ashore, we found a cosy little pub nearby; a roaring fire, blazing lights and the glitter of brilliantly polished copper and brass dazzled our fog-weary eyes.

The return journey to the ship, some two hilarious hours later, was somehow not nearly so nerve-racking. I organised a big, hot meal and then we lost no time in retiring to our bunks, for there was to be an early start next morning.

It seemed as though I had been asleep a mere five minutes when I was jabbed unmercifully in the ribs at the crack of dawn on Sunday morning. Mr. Wilson was anxious to have us on the move again, chiefly, I suspected, because he had been unable to sleep long himself. He had the grandfather and grandmother of all headaches, due to the fact that he had slept in the petty officers' cabin with the portholes tightly shut and a paraffin stove going all night, because of the intense cold.

Pressing on upriver, I was disappointed that it proved unnecessary for Tower Bridge to open for us. We sailed humbly beneath it, the twin gateway towers ignoring our insignificant size with lofty disdain.

Cadogan Pier, Chelsea, provided a convenient mooring for lunch, and we set out on the last leg of our journey. This part was by far the most complicated, with numerous locks to go through, awkward bends in the river to negotiate and, worst of all, some very low bridges which we had immense difficulty in clearing. The trouble was caused by the height of the ship's bridge and funnel and it required all Mr. Wilson's skill to manœuvre her so that she did not hit anything, including the ground.

By late afternoon we had arrived at a small boatyard a short distance above our future birth. It was too late to put the ship on to our moorings, so she was left at the boatyard until the following weekend.

Before joining us at Gillingham, Jeff had brought down a car and left it at the boatyard for our return journey to London. Everyone was piling into it as I lingered on the river bank and surveyed the ship.

Evening had closed over her and all was quiet. The wide river flowed smoothly beneath her hull. A fitful breath of wind moved her and the lines securing her bows rose and tautened, then sank again as she came back into position. The western sky glowed with dull pink and steely blue. A dog barked outside one of the bungalows on the far side of the river. Occasional buses made their way over the graceful, white stone bridge which spanned the river just above the yards.

Long, slender, almost fragile-looking, she lay peacefully by the river bank. From her proud, purposeful bows to her blunt stern she looked every inch a thoroughbred. There was a sound of silence lying all about her, a sound only apparent after the day-long clangour and uproar of her engines had been stilled. With the snow thick on her decks, she had returned to her birthplace, no longer a warship, but about to be refashioned into a civilian vessel, registered as a private yacht and named—*Nicotina*.

Getting Ready, Getting Set and Going

FIVE DAYS after bringing the *Nicotina* up river we were on the road again, bound for the boatyard where we had left her. The owner of the yard very kindly helped us to move her on to our moorings, and it was as well that he did, for, left to our own devices, we should certainly have run her aground. Here she could stay, indefinitely, until we had eradicated the naval austerity and completed her civilian transformation.

For fifteen laborious months we shuttled, every weekend, between the ship and London. During the wintertime we had to use a four-wheel-drive truck, otherwise access to the ship was impossible. The only approach to the river bank where she lay, moored to a row of tall poplars, was along a narrow lane and across three fields, one of them used by tanks as a testing ground. Many a Sunday night I stood on the bank, waiting for the boys to finish locking up, and listened to the wind shuffling through the bare branches above me. Looking at the black bulk of the ship in the eerie, moaning darkness, it was hard to believe that one day we would take her into the warm sunshine of some different climate.

About this time there were some appalling floods and the Thames overflowed its banks very extensively. There was no means of reaching the ship at all, except by water; it was not even possible to say which was flooded field and which the actual river. It was just one huge inland ocean. To get aboard, we used an Indian-type canoe Mike had acquired. A canoe is an unstable conveyance at the best of times, but with three heavily clad adults in it, plus food supplies, tools, stray chunks of machinery and, once, a heavy dynamo, the fragile craft was almost always within a hair's breadth of being swamped.

Immediately we were launched from the boatyard, the perilously fast current grabbed us and swept us off downstream with alarming

velocity. Arriving abreast of the ship, we arrested our hurtling progress by clutching at a rope purposely left dangling over the side.

The pandemonium was increased, one weekend in particular, by Mike contriving to convey on board some sheets of asbestos. There were six of them, each about six feet long by three feet wide, and great was my astonishment when I discovered that asbestos is very, very heavy stuff. They were piled across a carley float and Mike's theory was that we could tow it down river behind the canoe. In practice, we had no sooner pushed off than the carley float shot out in front and we were ignominiously trailed along behind. Frantically we struggled to keep the convoy heading in approximately the right direction until we came to what must have been a bend in the river, when it was in its right mind. A large, bushy tree, apparently growing straight out of the water, trapped us. The carley float flipped round one side of it, whilst the canoe trundled around the other, so that we met the float virtually face to face. Extrication was achieved only by brute force, cunning and much foul language.

Naturally, the winter programme of work was all set below decks. We completed a multitude of jobs such as pumping out and cleaning the bilges, installing some rather ambitious plumbing, washing down paintwork and converting the galley. This last involved hacking up and chucking out the antique range and putting in, instead, a small boiler and a paraffin cooker. It was a real red-letter day when I was able to move into the completed galley and luxuriate in the vastly increased working space.

One weekend we drove to Weybridge to inspect the two diesels which Mike had bought. They were the best choice for the *Nicotina* that we could find, in the diesel category, since they had a good power to weight ratio and could easily be installed on the existing engine beds. Admittedly, we were reducing our horsepower from 1300 to 450 but we were cutting the running costs by an even greater margin, and increasing the safety factor into the bargain. There was to come a time, too, when I was to be profoundly thankful that our fuel tanks were full of diesel oil and not high octane petrol, with its much lower flashpoint.

We watched as the diesels were lifted by crane on to the lorry that would take them to the boatyard. As the future starboard engine rose high into the air, I moved forward to take a photograph. In

my viewfinder I noticed that the engine appeared to be getting much bigger. Looking up, it was uncomfortably apparent that the cable had slipped and the engine had made a sudden descent to some eight or nine feet above me. Taking my snap rather precipitately, I retired out of range.

After the long, cold drag of winter, the summer transformed our weekends completely. Friends would drive down with picnic meals, anticipating a leisurely day, only to find themselves press-ganged into work of some kind or another. I have to admit to a certain indulgence in swimming and canoeing on my own part, for Mike had strong slave-driving tendencies, and they needed checking occasionally. The only sure fire way of luring him from toil was to suggest some fishing.

Prone on deck sunbathing, one afternoon, I got a monumental rating from Mike for stubbing out my cigarette on a conveniently placed pipe which protruded from the deck. Such was my ignorance of the anatomy of the ship that I was unaware that this pipe was an air vent to one of the fuel tanks containing the volatile petrol.

Still the work went on, caulking decks, removing armour plating, dismantling the "bandstands" which had seated the ship's guns, and varnishing woodwork. The day came when the ship lay resplendent in her first coat of glistening white. With the grey, naval paint and the big, black numbers all eliminated, I caught the first inkling of the grace and beauty we were bringing to light.

A curious feature of t^t's time was our regular, weekly date, on Sunday mornings at about 11.30 a.m., with two families of swans, who held a most extraordinary ceremony. One family came from up-river and consisted of father, mother, and three cygnets. The other family, coming from downriver, had five cygnets. Each group would swim towards the other until they were level with the bows and stern of the ship respectively. Then the mothers and cygnets would remain more or less stationary, whilst the two fathers swam towards each other and, when they met, paddled round and round in circles, stretching out their necks and hissing at each other, for about five or ten minutes. This ritual having been duly observed, they turned and rejoined their families, all departing again in the ways in which they had come.

There was no shortage of traffic on the river, during the summer

months, the most frequent passers-by being the pleasure boats plying between Richmond and Windsor. For the most part they were considerate and well-mannered, passing at a moderate speed which caused us little inconvenience. Far more troublesome were the private cabin cruisers which roamed the river in their dozens, most of whom appeared to be under the impression that they owned it.

From our observations of them, it became apparent that there were certain, indispensable fashion features of these aquatic equipages, notably a blinding display of chromium plating, the flaunting of an outsize Red Duster, and the carriage on deck of an Alsatian dog. Such characteristics could have been tolerated for their amusement value, were it not for the selfish attitude of these Summer-Season Sinbads. With a few exceptions, most of them behaved in a thoroughly boorish fashion, tearing up and down the river with much stuttering of little engines and great flourishes of water and spray. The wash that they left behind them set the *Nicotina* surging in her berth, wrenching at her moorings and dislodging the four stout poles which held her off the river bank. Time and time and time again we would have to drag them out of the water and wedge them back in position, cursing the while.

By the time a second spring had come around, we had done more or less all that we could do to the ship, by ourselves. Now it was necessary to have the major work done professionally. There were certain structural alterations that Mike wanted, which would have taken us too long to do alone. Already we had been working on her for eighteen months and Mike was anxious to get away in the coming summer.

For the last time we started our Hall Scott Defenders and moved into the boatyard. There, the petrol engines were taken out and the diesels installed. The bridge was pushed right back, hard up against the funnel, and a neat cabin was built in between bridge and wheelhouse. This was the only change in superstructure which was made, Mike having strong views on other "B" class Fairmiles he had seen with ungainly deck cabins built on to them.

A staircase was installed from the wheelhouse to the saloon, which was roughly L-shaped, with the galley, somewhat sawn off, occupying the remaining space. Doorways were cut through several of the watertight bulkheads and a passage ran right through the ship from the wardroom, via the tank bay, down the port side of the engine

room and into the saloon. To make way for this passage in the tank bay, the port inner tank was moved into the engine room.

The original, watertight door into the messdeck was left intact, but forward of it a cabin was constructed, on the port side, and a bathroom to starboard. A new bulkhead was put in, to separate these from the rest of the messdeck, which was left empty for use as a hold.

All this work was not completed until the beginning of June, but while it was going on, an incident occurred which paved the way for our future activities.

Dismantling and salvaging useful items from the discarded petrol engines, one Saturday afternoon, Mike noticed two men standing nearby, watching him. This was not unusual; people often wandered about the boatyard and stopped to chat about the ship, but it was not long before Mike realised that these were no casual observers.

They drifted into conversation with him and the astonishing facts emerged that they were two Frenchmen, promoters and organisers of a cigarette-running business in the Mediterranean, and that they had come over to England to look for likely ships for hire. With an eye to future employment, Mike invited them aboard for a drink and, by evening, after a meal ashore, we were booked for work.

André and Louis, as I shall call them, proved gay and convivial company and, by the time they left us, a means of earning our livelihood in the Mediterranean, spiced with a little excitement and novelty, seemed assured. Terms and conditions had been discussed and it only remained for us to hie to Tangier at the earliest possible opportunity.

Sober reflection, the next morning, caused me the odd qualm, not of conscience, for I had no scruples about running cigarettes, but the problem arose of finding a suitable explanation to give my family. They were hardly likely to take kindly to an announcement that their daughter was about to career off to the Mediterranean and smuggle cigarettes. After careful thought, I told them that we were going to do private charter work, without specifying its exact nature. Chartering sounded so eminently respectable.

The great occasion arrived when, for the first time, the *Nicotina* tried out her new engines, and we took her down river, with the help of a pilot, as far as Sunbury. She moved rather gingerly at first, somewhat in the manner of a long bed-ridden convalescent, but she

soon got into her stride. Arriving outside Sunbury drydock, she felt her way into it stern first, and the heavy gates closed under her bows.

The foreman started the pumping machinery and, inch by inch, the water level crawled down the sides of the dock. As the ship began to settle on the bottom, every available hand was mustered to shore her up and by evening she was completely dry, with all the shores in place.

We spent a sizzling hot fortnight in the drydock. The sun struck down on us and the concrete walls and floor intensified the heat. We worked at full pitch, mainly because every day in the dock cost a vast amount of money, and the longer the ship was in there, the more expense we were piling up.

All the rough planking, originally for protection against ice, was stripped off, thousands of screw holes were filled in, the hull was thoroughly cleaned down, and anti-foul paint was applied in generous quantities. The pressure was tremendous; we bribed workmen to do overtime for us, we hustled at it ourselves, working late into the long, summer evenings, all to get out of the dock again before Mike was bankrupt.

Emerging from the drydock one morning, on the brink of penury, we returned to the boatyard for the final touches which would complete the transformation of H.M.M.L. XXX into M.Y. *Nicotina*. I stood on the bridge above the yards one day and studied her as she lay at her moorings, surveying her gracious reflection in the waters of the Thames with all the vanity of a female who knows that she is lovely to look at.

The last major problem was that of a crew. Because André and Louis had told us that they would be providing their own experienced crew, we did not need any permanent hands, but only temporary ones to work the ship out to Tangier. We advertised in the nautical press and were overwhelmed with replies from people at all stages of life from childhood to senility. Painfully we weeded out the hopeless and interviewed the possibles, winding up with an undergraduate and a chartered accountant as deckhands, and a surveyor as cook.

Robin, the undergraduate, was short, stocky and very strong in the arm, with a cheerful manner and twinkling blue eyes under a thatch of nut-brown hair. His fellow deckhand, Henry, was the very

opposite, dark, lanky and exceedingly tall, with a lugubrious expression on his rather pale face which belied a dry, sparkling wit. Our cook, Ginger, was vast and jovial with, it is almost superfluous to record, a head of carrot-coloured hair, and a total immunity to seasickness which was the first essential of his job.

We borrowed an engineer from a ship-building firm, and this was Harry, somewhat older than the rest of us, his silvering hair a little sparse on the top. Gentle and kindly, Harry was a born engineer, understanding his charges with instinctive as well as technical knowledge. Oddly enough, though he had spent years working on marine engines, he had never been to sea in his life.

Under him I served my "apprenticeship," and he it was who initiated me into the mysteries of diesels. I had always been very interested in engines and was fairly familiar with those to be found in cars, but I had begun to suspect that there was something rather different about diesels because I had once asked Mike where the sparking plugs were, only to be told that a diesel does not have any.

To say that we were ready to leave when we did would be an overstatement. Luggage was thrown aboard all anyhow, engine spares and tools were scattered around the engine room, two spare prop. shafts and a propeller were loose on deck, and an old engine, which we had bought to cannibalise for components, was insecurely parked on the engine-room coach roof. About the only commodities which were stowed in their rightful places were the fuel, engine oil, paraffin and water, these being in their respective tanks.

My doctor, on hearing that I was going to the Mediterranean, went to town on me and insisted on umpteen different kinds of vaccination and inoculation, and I was peppered with punctures in all limbs. My dentist, likewise, had drilled and filled with painful enthusiasm.

Roping everything down in a thoroughly unseamanlike manner, we started on our voyage, making our first stop at Teddington, where we tied up just above the lock for the night. Mr. Wilson was with us again, for the downriver haul, and that evening, after supper, we all went ashore for a drink, finding an excellent hostelry right by the river called the Anglers. We spent a thoroughly enjoyable evening under its roof, and, on our return to the *Nicotina*, even Mike was unusually uplifted. He extricated one of his golf clubs from the hold, found an aged golf ball and, teeing up on the fore-

deck, drove it off into the summer darkness, we knew not where.

Next morning we headed into Teddington Lock, where something of a technical embarrassment occurred. During the installation of the new engines we had discarded the engine-room telegraphs altogether and the gear and throttle controls had been taken direct through to the bridge. Not until we were inside Teddington Lock did we discover that, though the port gear lever was put into neutral, the engine was not necessarily out of gear. We found this out the hard way, by nearly boring our way through the lock gates. Mr. Wilson hollered down through the engine-room hatch and Harry quickly applied his weight to the gear lever, persuading it into the true, neutral position.

By this time, the lock keeper was bellowing his rage and we were distinctly unpopular. Luckily, no drastic damage was done, and, although we tried all kinds of ways and means to correct the fault, we never succeeded. After this incident, somebody, usually me, was always stationed in the engine room during any manœuvring, to ensure that the port gear really did go into neutral when required. I used to heave up a section of the floor boards so that I could see the prop. shaft and be sure that it was not turning when it should be static.

Arriving in the vicinity of Cadogan Pier, Chelsea, we moored alongside some concrete barges and a deck watch was maintained throughout the night. My stint was between five and seven in the morning and it took some time for my sleep-sodden senses to grasp the fact that there was something different about the position of the ship. When I had gone to sleep our bows had been pointing upriver, but now they were pointing downstream. In company with all the barges, we had swung round 180 degrees, and thus I learnt the simple fact that, below Teddington, the River Thames is tidal. It was all very confusing.

The next stop was at Tilbury, where Mr. Wilson made his farewells and left us with many fervent wishes for good luck. He must have known, though he was far too polite to say so, how much we needed all the luck we could get.

As at Teddington, we all went ashore in the evening to find some beer. On our return to the ship we found her much lower down in the basin than when we had left her; so much so, in fact, that she seemed to be all but dangling on the side of the basin by her moor-

ings We slackened off the ropes with very red faces. None of us had given a thought to the rise and fall of the tide.

The next port we aimed for was Dover. A chart showed us that the Goodwin Sands were *en route*, and Mike felt it prudent to hire a pilot for this leg, to ensure that we did not come to grief on them.

It was a glorious day, bright with sunshine, and a gentle zephyr escorted the *Nicotina*. I was in the galley, conferring with Ginger about lunch, when suddenly there was a terrific crash and the ship shuddered to a standstill. Ginger and I were thrown to the floor and bombarded by tumbling pots, pans and dishes, as well as being liberally splashed with hot soup which had been simmering on the stove.

I bolted on deck, only to have my worst fears confirmed. The *Nicotina* was *on the Goodwins*. We tried everything; we revved the engines up to full speed astern, then full speed ahead; we mustered all hands and raced from side to side of the ship to rock her, but she just would not move. I remember being filled with a blazing anger which utterly rejected the possibility of the ship meeting her end on these treacherous Sands. Such a furious rage rose up in me, in fact, that I felt I could shift her off by the sheer, maniacal strength of it.

And then we were moving. With the engines alternating between ahead and astern, and shrieking their cylinder heads off, we slid from the sandbank and continued on our way. We had been more than fortunate—the tide was coming in.

Apart from the fact that we tried to enter Dover harbour by the blocked entrance, thereby nearly impaling the *Nicotina* on some sunken wreckage, the rest of the trip was uneventful. Nobody said a word as the pilot left the ship, but, over supper, Mike remarked that he believed the man had been navigating with a road map.

Still in calm and beautiful weather, we proceeded along the coast in stately fashion as far as Littlehampton, where we anchored some three-quarters of a mile offshore. During the whole of the six days we were there, the *Nicotina* was a target for motor-boat trips. The local *Skylarks* circled us continuously, and once, when I was ashore, I heard a boatman chanting “Two bob for a ride out to the big yacht and back!” I was tempted to demand a rake-off.

Bill, who had done so much to help us on our way, left the ship at Littlehampton and returned home, and for a long time afterwards

I felt the loss of his good company and his special brand of gooney humour. He had never intended coming abroad with us, but although I had known that he would be leaving the ship, I still missed having him around.

Mike bought an outboard motor in Littlehampton, and on its very first outing, one wild and windy afternoon, the pair of us were shipwrecked on the beach, to the gratification of a large crowd of weather-disgruntled holidaymakers. We had to walk over a mile to a local boatyard, whose launch towed the dinghy back to the *Nicotina*. The revolting sensation of walking with a soaked skirt flapping round my legs, not to mention exceedingly damp under-wear, is with me yet.

One last recollection of Littlehampton comes to mind: of Mike's obstinate persistence with fishing. Having tried all the orthodox and accepted means of catching fish, and failed, he resorted to a curious system of his own. This involved squatting on the bottom step of the ship's companionway, at night, and shining a torch upon the face of the waters. Fish, attracted by the light, came swimming up to investigate, whereupon Mike would lunge at them with a heavy spanner in a vain endeavour to stun them.

Late into the night, when the rest of the crew had long since gone to their bunks and the ship slept quietly at anchor, Mike would keep his determined vigil, and the peace of the night would be shattered, now and again, by tremendous splashes and muted imprecations. The sight of the fish, so near and yet so far, appeared to fascinate and goad him, yet all he ever got for his efforts was wet.

Our next move saw us under way at 7.30 a.m. on a dull, August morning, heading for Portland. Mike's navigation, having been learnt in the Royal Air Force, was not always equal to the demands of the oceans, and somehow the *Nicotina* got into Portland Race.

For several minutes she behaved in a most extraordinary manner, bouncing about from side to side, tossing and heaving, and generally misbehaving herself, while the sea all round her seemed to be in a state of great agitation and put up a startling display of liquid pyrotechnics. But we came through it without any drastic consequences and anchored at Portland for the night, whence we moved into Weymouth harbour the next morning.

A few days afterwards, the weather became very bad and there

was a tremendous gale. A big international yacht race was in progress at the time, and several of the competing boats ran into Weymouth for shelter. One in particular, the *Bloodhound*, was just about the most beautiful thing I ever saw, in the sailing line, and another lovely sailer, the *Jinty*, lay alongside us.

Prudently, we waited until the fury had calmed somewhat, but it was still fairly brisk when we left Weymouth harbour and made our way to Lyme Regis. Anchored off shore because the harbour was too small for the *Nicotina*, we were plagued by a heavy swell which kept us wallowing day and night. The ship rolled and rolled, working up to a crescendo of movement and then slowing down again, only to restart on another crescendo. I subsided into a paralysing lethargy and went right off my food. Two agonising days and nights were spent in these slow torture circumstances, during which time we had various adjustments made to our radio equipment.

When the *Nicotina* finally pulled away from Lyme Regis, even the pummelling we endured on the next hop seemed preferable to the non-stop horror of heaving at anchor. And oh, the blessed relief of getting into a sheltered basin at Exmouth and of the ship actually lying *still*.

Food stores and duty-free cigarettes, whisky, gin and rum were taken on in this port, and, after our recent tossing, it proved essential to revise some of our ideas on stowage. The ship was a shambles, thanks to the English Channel. Something certainly had to be done before we faced the Bay of Biscay.

For six days we laboured, reorganising, stowing, securing and lashing down, then, on the seventh, we beat it for Salcombe and anchored in the Bag.

This was positively our last appearance in England, and quite a number of evenings were spent ashore, living it up. We admitted our sea-going inexperience to nobody, but went about the final preparations for departure with abundant optimism.

The last addition to our company was a feline character. She was a little tabby kitten, chock-a-block full of devilment and very affectionate, and we named her Diesel. She wreaked havoc and destruction on the new loose covers in the saloon and she was for ever underfoot in the galley, but, after coming off worst in one or two skirmishes with Ginger's rope-soled sandals, Ginger being inside them, she became very nimble indeed.

Armed with a health clearance paper certifying that we were not carrying any rampageous diseases, our passports, charts of all the areas we were likely to visit and a book of instructions to go with them, the *Nicotina* presented her bows to the open sea, one deep blue, starry night, and set forth on her voyage to Tangier.

3

Destination Tangier

WE WAITED for good weather before we finally went foreign; the night was still and the stars were out in force. Beyond the bay the sea had only a gentle, soothing swell. Majestically the *Nicotina* crossed the bar and England dropped slowly away astern of her.

Harry took the first engine-room watch and, after the excitement of leaving had died down, I decided to try for a little sleep. I went to my cabin, lay down on my bunk and closed my eyes. But there was no blotting out all the new sensations. The throb of the engines, pulsating through the ship, was still too new for me to accept as just an extra sleep-deterrant; and there were other aids to wakefulness, such as the motion of a ship at sea, and the thumps and thuds as Mike consulted charts in the wheelhouse, then stepped out on deck and gave his instructions to Robin at the wheel.

Throughout the night and into the next day I stood alternate watches of four hours with Harry, and initiated myself into the routine that I was to follow for many a long voyage. The sound of the engines, as I sat at the top of the hatch, became the most familiar thing in my life. I came to know every variation and every combination of their two voices, and, particularly at night, I could almost imagine that they were holding a conversation.

Sighting the French coast about midday, we were disconcerted to find that there had been some miscalculation: in fact, we had not arrived at all where we had expected. Stopping the ship, we lay with engines idling when, suddenly, we heard ourselves being hailed by two French fishing boats, some distance away. A brief, triangular shouting match ensued between Mike and the fishermen, using loud hailers. They made no attempt to come any closer to the *Nicotina* but electrified us with the information that we were loitering in a minefield. It was a remarkably uncomfortable and nerve-racking

twenty minutes before the fishermen, by shouting directions to us, guided the *Nicotina* out and set us on the correct course for Brest.

We tied up in the harbour alongside a French cable-laying ship and officialdom swarmed aboard to process us in the manner of their various capacities. I watched the man who was going through the passports and noticed him wince as he examined my photograph. I was not surprised.

Diesel was the first off the ship; she moved next door to the cable-layer and made herself known to their cook in double quick time. The rest of us took a run ashore to explore the town and Mike, with excellent forethought, ordered in a case each of Benedictine, Cointreau and Martell brandy.

Five o'clock the next morning saw us making ready for sea again, only to find that Diesel was still aboard the cable ship. She was lurking beneath an awesome piece of machinery and I had to crawl underneath it, flat on my face, to extract her.

Sailing out of Brest harbour, past the shattered U-boat pens, we set our course for Corunna, roughly 360 miles away. It was the longest hop yet, and our route lay slap across the notorious Bay of Biscay. There was a long, greasy swell which made the *Nicotina* roll quite appreciably and rendered me singularly uninterested in food.

Early in my 8 p.m. to midnight watch we ran into thick fog and the temperature dropped drastically. Peering towards the bridge, I could just make out Henry's lanky length coiled over the wheel. It was obvious that we were crazy to be charging through fog at ten knots, on a main shipping route, and he called out Mike, who immediately decided to reduce speed.

I shut down the port engine altogether and lowered the revs on the starboard to 900. This brought Harry post haste to the engine room, thinking that something was wrong. By midnight we were all up on deck, working on the theory that six pairs of eyes were better than one. Harry having taken over in the engine room, I was stationed in the bows, with Robin, on look-out duty.

The *Nicotina* lurched slowly over the oily swell, yawning and wallowing violently. The fog pressed in on us and the damp, cold atmosphere saturated the ship. Frequently we heard weird honkings and whistling noises coming at us from unidentifiable directions. We answered each one by clanging the ship's bell, but the fog strangled the sound before it had travelled far.

Passing through the saloon, on my way to don yet another layer of clothing, I saw Diesel, paws well splayed out, claws dug deep into the coconut matting and an expression of profound disgust on her face. Apparently I was not alone in my lack of sea-legs.

Nervously we crept along through the weary night hours and not until it was almost full daylight did we run out of the fog and thankfully resumed our normal cruising speed. Early that evening the *Nicotina* sidled slowly alongside a quay in Corunna and the Bay was behind her.

A good night's sleep was the first essential, after the usual formalities had been completed. Next morning we found the *Nicotina* to be an object of immense curiosity. The quayside was lined, several deep, by a crowd of inquisitive onlookers and probing, black eyes took in every detail of the ship and her crew, whilst comments in raucous Spanish flew back and forth. During the whole of our ten-day stay that quay was constantly crowded with sight seers, and the *Nicotina* drew a gate which would have been the envy of any football club.

Diesel deserted ship in Corunna. We searched high and low, but either she was stolen or she had decided that sea faring was not for her and walked off of her own free will.

The day after our arrival, another British boat came in and tied up alongside us. Rejoicing in the name of *Our Girls*, she was a very ancient Cornish fishing vessel, almost literally held together with string, and aboard her were three young men who planned to sail her just as far as she would go before sinking.

A good deal of mutual visiting went on, and we would often go ashore in a crowd about 9 p.m., and join in the evening parade up and down the main streets of the town.

The Spanish timetable is considerably more civilised than our own. It is customary to take a stroll in the evening and exchange news with friends and relations in passing, inspect each other's clothes and do any shopping that may be required, since all the shops remain open until at least ten in the evening. There is something very pleasant and friendly about these evening perambulations, with the sun setting and all the street and shop lights coming on, and a warm breeze stirring the air. Nobody hurries. People stop to chat in little groups and only when they have satisfied themselves that all is well with the world and their neighbours do they drift off to have their evening meal.

But the highlight of our Corunna visit was a memorable party with a young Spanish couple we met, Jenny and Nano, who took us to a restaurant in the old part of Corunna. It was a huge, cavern-like place, with a high, arched roof and stone-flagged floors, in which wooden partitions had been erected to form small cubicles. The partitions stopped short of the roof by several feet, and so the sound of conversation accompanied what was otherwise a private party.

I was sitting between Nano and Robin when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something moving on the stone floor. I glanced round. Crouching quietly on the floor was a grey rabbit. Then I saw two or three more, brown and white ones, hopping leisurely round the table and picking up crumbs. I nudged Robin. He, too, saw the rabbits, and I was greatly relieved. It had crossed my mind that perhaps the unaccustomed Spanish wine was taking a rather severe toll of my senses.

Intermittent strains of music drifted over the partitions to us and, just as we were finishing our meal, Nano left our party and returned with two cheerfully grinning Spanish boys, one carrying a guitar and the other a piano accordion. For over an hour they played and sang to us, whilst we sat at our ease and sipped our wine. Then Nano said something to the musicians, whispered to Jenny, and she sang for us. She had a clear, strong voice and she sang naturally and spontaneously, with only an occasional gesture to her accompanists to indicate the timing she wanted.

We urged her on until she had exhausted all her songs, and then Nano whispered to her again. She shook her head and looked a little shy, but he continued to persuade her, encouraged by the two musicians, who entered enthusiastically into the spirit of the evening.

The table was pushed back, leaving a semi-circle of clear floor space, and Jenny danced for us. As the music rose and fell, and her feet tapped and stamped on the stone floor, first one and then another face appeared in the doorway. Slowly, gradually, people drifted into our cubicle until it was packed. They stood behind our chairs, between us and around us, and clapped in time to the music as Jenny whirled and spun, faster and faster. Quite suddenly, the dance ended. She remained for a second or two completely still, her full skirt still swinging about her, and there was a burst of applause and congratulations.

When the party finally broke up, and we wandered back to the

Nicotina, it was five in the morning and dawn was blushing over the water. I fell into my bunk, relaxed and happy, with Spanish music ringing in my ears and Spanish wine singing in my head. Precisely two hours later, at 7 a.m., my slumber was penetrated by a repeat performance from the accordion and guitar. I peered blearily through my porthole; there they were, the two musicians, still grinning, and still playing. We found out afterwards that Jenny and Nano had bribed them to wake us up.

When at last we tore ourselves away from the gaiety of Corunna, we headed down the Spanish coast for a couple of days' call at Vigo, about forty miles further south. No sooner had we hove into view than the palatial yacht club sent up a stream of signal flags and we had a distressing suspicion that they were intended for us.

The exact chronology of the ensuing flag "conversation" escapes my memory now, but the lasting impression is that it went on for hours and was very one sided, since the yacht club was obviously expert and rushed its signals up, while we caused long delays in the proceedings during which we decoded their signals and strung together our replies. Finally, we just pretended to be blind. The pace was too hot for beginners.

Lisbon had been chosen as our next port of call and the voyage there was decidedly unpleasant. There was a very heavy swell and, as usual, I seemed to be the only person on board who suffered from it, although Mike admitted to feeling none too comfortable either. The *Nicotina* rolled wickedly.

We had left Vigo at 7:30 a.m., and we did not reach Lisbon until twenty-four hours later. In point of fact, we were off the mouth of the Tagus about 4 a.m., but Mike was not too confident about making our way up the river in the dark, so we ran down the coast for an hour and a half, and then turned round and ran back again.

Just as it was getting light we struck an early morning fog patch. Vaguely we felt our way in the direction in which we thought we should be going, and crawled along for about half an hour in this fashion. Then, abruptly and somewhat dramatically, the fog lifted and we found ourselves heading straight for a sandy beach and only about 400 yards off it. We backed off rather hastily, and made our way up the Tagus without further incident.

Here, *Our Girls* joined us again, and here also we met up with a Captain Atkinson, the skipper of a British merchant ship of the

McAndrew Line, called the *Churrucca*. A hectic party ensued, aboard the *Nicotina*, and when return hospitality was arranged and we visited his ship, Captain Atkinson presented us with a new Red Duster. He had been scandalised by the inadequacy of our existing one, which was certainly small and rather torn and battered. But the one he gave us was *Churrucca*-size and far too big; it trailed in the water behind us, so we kept it for burials and went on using our old ensign.

Being a professional seaman, Captain Atkinson was politely appalled by our lack of sea-going know-how and, although he expressed the fervent hope that we would get to Tangier in due course, it was apparent that he really thought we were all foolhardy to the point of lunacy.

For some technical reason we left Lisbon at midnight and had no sooner cleared the Tagus than we spotted *Our Girls*, who had left twenty-four hours before, wallowing about in the swell. We ran in a big circle round her, shouting a few disparaging remarks, then headed off down the coast in the direction of Lagos.

It seemed to be our fate that, as soon as we left harbour the weather turned sour on us. We had not been out more than three or four hours when it began to blow like hell. During the evening, we were overtaken by one or two big merchant ships. I remember one, in particular, which came very close, just off Cape St. Vincent, towering over us as she passed. The sun was setting and the threshing ocean was blood red as this big, black cargo ship overtook the *Nicotina*; she must have been very lightly loaded because I could see her huge propeller half out of the water, churning it to a pink foam in the evening light.

By the time we were abreast of Lagos, we simply dared not turn and go in. The seas seemed so huge that, in our ignorance, we feared the *Nicotina* would capsize if we tried to turn her broadside on to them, and our only alternative was to continue running on down the coast.

Mike set our course and retired to his cabin, telling Henry at the wheel that, according to the chart, we should see a green light on our port side, in about two hours' time, and to wake him as soon as it was sighted.

The leaden minutes dragged by as I endured my watch, stricken by the ghastly inertia of seasickness. In between bouts, I staggered

down into the engine room and checked round. As I sat on the ventilator box by the engine-room hatch, I thought of all the people on safe, steady, dry land, going about their lives and business. I thought of the wives sitting in the coffee shops having their morning gossip, of the mothers doing the housework and looking after their children, of all the sensible, sane people, living in comfortable, warm houses, where nothing rolled about and there were meals at all the usual times—and I laughed into the wind. Then I rushed for the side again.

But even as I reeled back to my seat and clasped the ventilator for support, I was convinced that I could overcome this weakness and adjust to the sea, in time; I knew with overriding certainty that this was the way of life I wanted. In that moment I had a strange flashback to my childhood and remembered something which had not consciously entered my mind for years.

When I was some six or seven years old, my father took me for a holiday to the same island where he had spent his own boyhood holidays. I went everywhere with him. We spent hours wandering round the little harbour, we went sailing when it was calm and, one day, when it was very rough, we walked down to the rocks at the very edge of the raging water to watch the storm.

I remembered the rollers coming in, huge and grey, spattered with white, and the crash and roar as each succeeding breaker met the rocks. I remembered how we stood as near to the edge as we dared, and ran for it when a breaker bigger than the others seemed to be heading our way.

At first I was afraid. The noise was so overwhelming, the whole world seemed to be swirling and howling. I sensed the incredible power of the sea. Each wave was trying to reach me. The whole fury of the wind and water was concentrated on seizing me and dashing me to pieces.

Gradually that impression became transformed and I was conscious of an ascendancy within myself. The forces were no longer outside, they were coming from inside me now, and I felt that I held the power. I wanted to get closer to the boiling water, to fling myself into and shout at it, "see, I am not afraid, I am stronger than you."

With each new blast of rage from the wind, each lash of spray in my face, each thunderous roll of water, I grew more powerful. I

went nearer to the edge and a gust of water slashed my face. I barely felt its sting. I was delirious with the power of the sea.

I threw back my head and shouted in the face of the storm. What I shouted I do not know. I was drunk with elemental force and fury, possessed by them.

Then, slowly, the elation left me and I felt drained and weak. And again, as I turned from the sea, I was afraid. I looked back once more and saw the raging infinity of water. I had felt its strength, had borrowed it and flung it in the teeth of the sea, and lost it again. Once more I was a small girl, frightened by the storm and clinging to my father's hand.

As I grew up, there were other holidays by the sea, but never one like that one. The memory of it slowly faded, as a child's memories are apt to do, but the experience of that storm remained somewhere in a mental pigeon-hole. Now, as I was tossed and thrown around on this wild Atlantic, a key had turned in my mind and the pattern for my life was there, clear and shorn of doubts.

Preoccupied with these thoughts, it suddenly dawned upon me that the green light we were expecting to see had put in its appearance. Henry had already spotted it, and woke Mike as instructed.

He emerged from his cabin, half dazed with sleep, and went on deck to take a bearing on the light, then returned to the chart table to make his calculations. Tottering into the wheelhouse at this point, I was mystified to hear Mike mutter that there must be something wrong with the chart. According to his reckoning, we were somewhere inland, in the middle of Portugal.

Concluding that he might have taken the bearing wrongly, and, as the light should still be in view behind us, he decided to try again. But when he stepped out on deck once more, the light was still level with us, though it was a good twenty minutes since he had taken the first bearing. To our chagrin, we then realised that the green light was that of another ship, closer inshore than ourselves, but running parallel with us. As a nautical howler, it was about our best effort; and we never did see the light we were expecting.

All through that night and into the following one, we slogged on down the coast, the *Nicotina* battered mercilessly by the Atlantic. She pounded and crashed her way across a sea that was terrifying in its wildness. I saw a solid, implacable mountain of water towering over us and I shut my eyes, clutched on to the ventilator and waited

for the end. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind that this must be the end. I was convinced that not even the *Queen Elizabeth* could survive in a sea like this.

The *Nicotina* rose on the mountain as though she had no weight of her own at all, and the sensation left my stomach a good many fathoms under water. As quickly as she had been lifted on to the crest, she was hurled down into a bottomless valley, with the mountains towering all round her. I had barely time to realise that we were still afloat when another sea came heading in our direction. Again I shut my eyes, and again we endured the same undignified tossing. It felt exactly like being in a lift which had gone out of control and was rushing up and down a skyscraper at high velocity. In addition, we were rolling furiously from side to side and water was sluicing along the decks in great torrents.

As the weather deteriorated still further, my semi-paralysed senses registered the fact that both engines were racing badly, and I knew that I ought to climb down into the engine room and throttle them back. The thought of moving appalled me and I did battle with myself to gain the necessary will power.

Somewhat I heaved my feet over the coaming and clambered painfully down the ladder. There was chaos everywhere. The lights swayed from side to side, dazzling my eyes, and all hell and pandemonium were let loose. An indescribably muddled collection of tools, rolls of wire, cans and general engine-room equipment had come adrift from their usual places and were churning about on the floor.

I remained where I was, clutching on to the ladder and watching the rev counter on the starboard engine. I reckoned that if I throttled the engines down to 1,000 revs, that would leave them sufficient leeway to race without doing themselves any injury. Between rolls, I lowered the revs. on them both, and then it struck me that I would have to tell Mike, who was at the wheel. Better to go up on deck again, and risk falling overboard, I decided, than to go through the saloon, below decks, and risk getting a whiff of food from the galley.

It was quite out of the question for us to keep to any kind of a course. All we could do, in this sea, was to head into it and hope for the best. Sometimes, when the ship was poised on the crest of one roller, another followed up and held her there, so that, when

she took the plunge downwards again, she had no time to come up on the next one. Her bows buried themselves in the grey flood and her stern wavered feebly, as she writhed under the colossal weight of water. Another wave, coming in a different direction, hit her when she was down and, at such moments, it seemed inconceivable that she could ever rise again out of that frenzy of crushing water.

But the *Nicotina* had been built for this sort of thing, and knew how to ride it. Impossible as it seemed, she rose, time and again, the water streaming off her sides in tremendous cascades, only to be bludgeoned down by another avalanche of sea.

At 1 a.m. the next morning we had arrived off Cadiz. The sea had moderated slightly, but we were still rolling very heavily. Mike, who had also been seasick, was figuring out how we were to get into the harbour. We were all exhausted and only too anxious to lie in the calm shelter of the port, but there was one slight hitch. The pilot book said that it was imperative to have the Cadiz pilot boat to take us into the harbour. How to get it to come out to us, at one o'clock of a filthy, black morning, was the difficulty. Further reference to the pilot book told us that we were supposed to flash a signal towards the harbour. What it should have been I cannot remember, and, anyway, none of us knew Morse, so I seized the Aldis lamp and flickered feverishly in the general direction of the shore. Nobody appeared to take the slightest notice of us.

Finally, Mike decided that probably the pilot boat did not function at night, if it functioned at all. We could see a long row of lights which appeared to be a jetty, and we thought we could make our way in and tie up to that.

Five minutes later, it became suddenly and alarmingly apparent that what we were heading for was no jetty, but a large, very large, passenger liner, emerging from the port. How she missed us we never knew, but she passed us starboard to starboard and I could have touched her side with a boathook. Then we saw the pilot boat directly behind her. It had been too busy getting her out to come for us.

It pulled alongside the *Nicotina* and the pilot came aboard to deliver a considerable number of no doubt well-chosen words on our foolhardiness. As it was all in Spanish, however, it made little impression upon us. Then he took us into the harbour and we dropped anchor.

I crawled weakly into my bunk and knew nothing more.

About lunchtime the following day I limped up on deck into a blaze of sunlight and found Mike sitting in front of the wheelhouse. He pointed, wordlessly, across the harbour. I saw what he meant. About 150 yards ahead of us it was just possible to see the remains of an old wall, sticking up out of the water. Had we come in on our own, in the dark, we would have run the *Nicotina* straight on to it.

The two days we stayed in Cadiz were entirely spent, on my part, in recovering. I was very frail after my sea-going initiation.

Mike and the others went ashore, partly sight-seeing and partly to do some provisioning, and came back with an extraordinary tale about an elderly Englishman they had met in a café, who had a small sailing yacht. He was a widower and, becoming tired of the wartime-in-peace conditions in England, had bought himself the boat, hired a hand to help him with it, and pushed off.

The gimmick of his story was that he expressed himself completely devoid of any trust in paper money, and had changed all he possessed into half-crowns, which were stowed away in sacks in the bilges of his boat as ballast.

The last leg of our journey took only five and a half hours and was uneventful. We sailed serenely across a sparkling green sea into Tangier and dropped our anchor in the bay at 4.30 p.m. on a lovely September afternoon.

We had made it.

Smuggling for Beginners

TANGIER HARBOUR, such as it was, appeared to exist in a state of permanent disorder, the whole smothered in thick dust. Brand new cars sat in rows, looking as though they were never likely to be moved and already rusting. Sacks and sacks of indeterminate contents were stacked, higgledy-piggledy, everywhere. Crates of goods were pushed together to form rough shelters, with an old piece of sacking draped across the "doorway," and each housed several Arabs. Humanity of all races and colours came and went without let or hindrance. Open sheds housed more goods, and several large, silver-painted storage tanks marked the local fuel depot.

But the smell, the vile, Middle Eastern smell, permeated everything, assaulted the nostrils and impeded the breathing. Although she was never still, it was the lesser of two evils by far to have the *Nicotina* anchored out in the clean air of the bay.

Unfortunately our plans to start work immediately we reached Tangier had gone somewhat adrift. André and Louis had expected us to arrive some weeks earlier and, unable to wait for us, they had employed another ship. But Mike quickly found that work was not hard to come by. He was introduced to the boss of another organisation, Monsieur X, who was prepared to charter the *Nicotina* on condition that we found the crew, and he put his own supercargo aboard.

This stipulation presented no difficulties. There were always experienced hands for hire, hanging around the local bars, and it did not take long to find a navigator, an engineer, a deckhand and a cook. After a pyrotechnical farewell party, our four temporary hands, Robin, Henry, Ginger and Harry departed for home, and the new crew took their places aboard the ship.

The navigator, Pete, was an American, tall, thin and good-looking in a sallow sort of style. Fortunately, he could speak Spanish, which

enabled him to converse with the new engineer, Fernando, and the cook, Pedro. These two were both short, dark men, wiry and agile, and they appeared to find life a cheerful business, on the whole, for they were frequently making merry and laughing together.

No so the fourth member of our new ship's company, a Portuguese deckhand by the name of Juan: he took things very seriously, judging by the solemn expression generally to be seen on his weather-beaten face. Small and square, he stalked about the ship with an air of heavy responsibility, and certainly he was conscientious. Our ropes, fenders and other gear were always in apple-pie order during the period that they were Juan's duty, and he could be trusted to hold the ship accurately on her course, whatever the weather. His muscular arms were smothered with garish tatooing and he had one of the most gruff voices I ever heard. On the rare occasions when he did smile, he revealed a set of perfect white teeth which aroused my greenest envy.

The supercargo put aboard by Monsieur X was a Corsican, and a more unforgettable character it would be hard to find. Of medium height, fresh-complexioned and with black, curly hair, Luc had a habit of adopting the typical stance of that other infamous Corsican of long ago. His deep-sea-blue eyes could stare with glacial tranquillity upon a crisis, or light with the warmth of laughter in moments of relaxation.

He had a great weakness for a certain type of small squid. This, in itself, was nothing out of the ordinary, but the fact that he ate them alive set the seal of eccentricity upon him, in my mind at any rate. Should we happen to meet any fishermen during our travels, Luc would trade a carton of cigarettes for a supply of his favourite delicacy. After the initial shock of seeing him indulge in this repulsive practice, I made myself scarce whenever a fishing boat came alongside.

Luc was a wizard with a knife. I once saw him pin down a playing card which had fluttered away on a slight breeze, as a poker game was in progress. It was lying right at the very edge of the deck and at any moment I expected to see the wind deposit it in the water. Out of the very corner of my eye I caught a slight flick of Luc's wrist, and, fractions of a second later, a knife was shuddering in the deck, straight through the centre of the card.

This, then, was our supercargo, our master of ceremonies and, in the fullness of time, my very good friend. Above all things, Luc wore the mantle of his responsibility as if it had dropped on to his shoulders at birth. In his capacity as supercargo he acted as agent for the owner of the freight and was in charge of all the arrangements for landing it at the other end, and dealing with the payment for it. The physical safety of the thousands of cigarettes we carried was his concern, and this was no negligible part of his duties, for hi-jackers were not unknown, and ships had even been attacked while lying in harbour with their freight aboard.

In a recent case, a ship had been challenged off Marseilles by a customs boat, and the skipper, thinking he had no cause for concern because he was well out of French territorial waters, quietly allowed two officers to come aboard. No sooner were they in strategic positions than lethal hardware was produced and the entire crew was roped up and locked below, whilst their cargo was quickly transhipped to the "customs" boat. They were then left, their ship wallowing in the swell with her engines still ticking over, to free themselves and puzzle out how the hi-jackers had managed to lay hands on genuine customs uniforms.

Once all the negotiations had been completed, and the crew had acquainted themselves with their new ship, we moved into the pungent harbour to load up. I watched from the shade of the wheelhouse as, in broiling heat, a string of ragged Arabs formed a chain and manhandled the cargo aboard. They were barefooted and each wore an old sack, one side of which had been torn open, over his head.

We took on five hundred cases in all, in a mixed bag of five well-known American brands. The major proportion of them went down into the hold and the balance was scattered all over the ship. Every available space was cluttered up with cases; we even sat on them, slept on them and ate off them.

As we moved out of the harbour and anchored again in the bay to complete the final preparations, another Fairmile took our place alongside the loading jetty. This was the *Pinch of Salt*, a well established and highly successful member of the Nicotine Navy, respected equally by those who tried to catch her and those who worked with her. Between her and the *Nicotina* there developed a strong sister-ship affinity which was to endure for many a smuggler's moon.

The *Pinch of Salt* was a lovely ship, a true Fairmile, unspoiled by any additional deck structure, and painted in a business-like shade of bluish grey. Though three years younger than the *Nicotina*, she was way ahead in experience of the cigarette trade.

From the precision and efficiency with which she manœuvred, we deduced that her skipper must be an ex-naval type, and so it proved. Wise in the ways of the sea, efficient in the running of his ship and as resourceful and wily in adversity as a door-to-door salesman, Jaspar was the soul of tact, giving us invaluable advice without making us feel too inadequate or green.

He was a man of even, steady temperament, straightforward and uncomplicated, like his ship. Lean and fit, with a rugged, character-carved face and observant eyes, Jaspar had a gold nugget for a heart, though he would be the last to admit it.

The *Nicotina* and the *Pinch of Salt* were to be closely associated in the future, and many were the occasion on which they anchored in close company or lay alongside each other in port.

Our departure, fully laden with cigarettes, took place at 10 o'clock on an early November morning, and we turned right to pass through the Straits of Gibraltar. I was taking the first engine-room watch, and settled myself comfortably on my ventilator box, beside the hatch. There was a distinct sense of unreality about the whole situation. It seemed impossible that we were at the culmination of all our planning, that I was actually on the high seas, bound for Italy with a cargo of contraband. A far cry, this, from the steady office job, the clacking typewriter and the squiggles in a shorthand notebook.

For a couple of days we ploughed steadily along, more or less skirting the Spanish coastline, but giving it a very wide berth, at least 20 miles off shore all the time. Pete, after conferring with Mike and Luc, had decided on this course in spite of the fact that it would add to our journey, because to him the *Nicotina* was a new ship, and he wanted to get the feel of her.

On the second night, I was down in the engine room having a check up when both gear levers suddenly went into neutral and the engine revs dropped to idling level. Curious to know the reason, I betook myself on deck. The night was fairly black but there appeared to be a large ship some three hundred yards astern of us. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I could see that

she had a distinctly military shape, and it transpired that she was a Spanish destroyer. Suddenly, a light high up in the superstructure of the warship began to flicker and blink. None of us could read morse but we presumed, fairly accurately, that they wanted to know who we were. Luc got out the Aldis and started to flash back at them.

After some ten minutes of this, the warship let fly a fearful blast of steam. Next, a colossal amount of thick, heavy smoke began to billow out of her funnel and, very slowly, she moved closer to us.

Not wanting to risk being run down, and having little confidence in Spanish seamanship as a whole, Pete also began to move, on a parallel course with the destroyer, and this immediately goaded her into another outburst of signalling. The next moment I was blinded. A powerful searchlight was being directed full on us and, apart from the discomfort to the eyes, it somehow seemed rather embarrassing.

Then Mike had a brainwave. He extracted our enormous "burials" ensign the *Churrasca* had given us in Lisbon, which Pedro and Fernando held up, directly in the beam of the searchlight, so that they could see our nationality. Immediately the searchlight went out, so we began to move again. At once the searchlight came on again. Once more we draped our sheet-like ensign along the side of the hull, and again the searchlight went out.

All this time Pete was stopping and starting, and, as we moved, so the destroyer moved parallel with us, but not coming any nearer. Each time she began to move she emitted a fearful groaning and the clouds of smoke got bigger and bigger. The whole affair rapidly deteriorated into an irritating farce. The destroyer came no nearer, and we dawdled about wondering what she would do if we simply revved up to full throttle and pushed off.

Finally, Luc became impatient. A full hour or more had passed since we had first stopped. Square dancing with a Spanish destroyer, in the middle of the night, was entertaining for the first quarter of an hour, but after that it palled. We had work to do.

With a final burst of miscellaneous flashes from our Aldis lamp, we pulled away at full revs and charged off into the night. The searchlight followed us for a short while, so I stood on the stern and waved in friendly fashion, hoping that this would give us an air of

innocence. Heaven only knew whether they were trying to bring any guns to bear on us or not, but although she followed us for a short while, belching ever more smoke, the destroyer gradually dropped behind us and was soon out of sight. This seemed all the more extraordinary as we could not possibly have been doing more than twelve knots, but we certainly outpaced that particular greyhound of the ocean.

Apart from this brush with the Spanish Navy, no other alarms were experienced, and, after five days at sea, we entered a long bay and made our way into Villefranche.

Luc immediately went ashore to make arrangements for landing our cargo, which had all been sealed and checked by the French customs as soon as we had arrived in the harbour.

There was little time to see anything of Villefranche, other than to register a quick impression of towering cliffs, an old château close to the water's edge, and a French Army barracks facing out towards the harbour. Exhaustion sent me straight to my bunk and, by the time I woke again, darkness had blotted out the scenery.

Arrangements having been made for a rendezvous that very night, 11.30 p.m. saw us rounding Cap Ferrat and heading for the Gulf of Genoa. I stood amidships and stared up at the black cross of the mast against the dark sky, speculating on whether we would be caught, what sort of treatment I could expect in an Italian gaol, and what on earth my family would say when all the resultant publicity came to their notice. But I had little time to anticipate the future; we were all pressed into the job of getting some 200 cases up on deck, ready for unloading.

Well before entering Italian territorial waters, Luc switched off the navigation lights and went round the ship personally to ascertain that the 'darken ship' order had been strictly carried out. All portholes were closed and the deadlights tightly screwed down.

It was eerie, charging through the black velvet night without even the reflection from the portholes to spotlight the ship's side-wash. The faint red glow from the compass gave Juan's grave face a weird, devilish aspect as he stood at the wheel, Luc beside him, peering through a pair of binoculars.

As the *Nicotina* drew nearer to the coast I watched Luc closely as he swept 360 degrees around us with his glasses. Occasionally he

paused and spent several seconds in concentration upon one particular direction. The shore lights came nearer and nearer. I looked at them, fascinated. Were we never going to stop? To my inexperienced eyes it seemed that the *Nicotina* was about to propel herself straight up the beach and on to the promenade. At last Luc eased the engines down and put them out of gear. Pete took Juan's place on the bridge and picked up the binoculars for an inspection of our position.

Falling slowly round into the cradle of the slight swell, the *Nicotina* lay, dark and shadowy, her engines rumbling softly at idling speed. Through the open hatch I could just distinguish Fernando, alert between the two engines. Luc had permitted only a tiny, violet light above each instrument panel, so that the dials could be seen.

Satisfied that it was safe to do so, Luc ordered the engines to be stopped, and all was silent. Barely a flicker of a breeze played around the ship. She rocked gently and I heard the faint argument between the wheelhouse door and the hook which held it open. Somebody on the shore was whistling a popular song.

Promptly on the dot of the rendezvous hour we heard the sound of engines and four fishing boats approached the *Nicotina*, silhouetted against the shore lights. Recognition signals were exchanged and soon two of them were alongside us, whilst the other two lay off a short distance. The haggle man, as I named the buyer's representative, clambered on board the *Nicotina* and retired to the saloon with Luc. By the light of a handkerchief-dimmed torch they counted out the cash, made arrangements for the following night's operation, and Luc cannily checked the notes for forgeries.

On deck there was an urgent scuffling of rubber-soled feet as the cases were brought to the side of the ship. Grunts of exertion told of their being lifted over the rail, numerous hands reached up to receive them, and faint thuds announced their safe transit into the fishing boats. A whispered curse, in Italian, signified that somebody had cut a hand on the steel bands which girded each case.

Immediately the first two contact boats were full they swung away from the *Nicotina* and made their heavily-laden, perilous way towards the shore. The second pair of boats came alongside and loaded, whilst all the time Pete watched and listened from the bridge and

Fernando hovered in the engine room, his hands within striking distance of the starter buttons.

Under cover of the departure of the last contact boat our own engines started, and the *Nicotina* made herself scarce, moving out to sea at a brisk but unflurried pace. Only when the three-mile limit had been left well astern of her did the lights come on once more and, with their comforting presence, restored an air of normality and slashed through the pall of tension in which the ship had been enveloped.

Two hours later, and some twenty miles due south of Genoa light, the *Nicotina* laid herself down to sleep, cradled in the soporific arms of a calm Mediterranean, her first night's smuggling done and all well. Exhausted with the inevitable nervous strain of such a first night, I went to my bunk just as faint streaks of dawn were creeping up over the horizon.

The following night was a repetition of the first, with the exception that the rendezvous was a different one and only three contact boats turned up instead of four; the engine of the fourth had refused to start and, for this reason, they took only 150 cases from us. We did not retire so far out to sea this time, stopping engines about six miles outside territorial waters.

Luc had suggested that we might take advantage of the particularly lovely weather and spend the next day cruising along the coast. It seemed to me to be tempting the Fates too far, but Luc pointed out that this was our first trip and the *Nicotina* was not yet known in the game. She would simply be taken for a visiting yacht, which, in a sense, she was. Nobody, he said, would dream that we would dare to behave like this with contraband aboard, and we might as well see something of Italy.

As a gamble, it paid off. With the remainder of the cargo safely out of sight in the hold and our awnings spread, we dawdled all day past the most superb scenery. As the evening drew in, Luc actually took the *Nicotina* right into Portofino harbour, swung her slowly round after we had looked our fill, and out again.

There was no rendezvous arranged for that night and Luc anchored the *Nicotina* in a small inlet whose sheer cliff walls rose up around us on all three sides. A tiny village balanced itself at the head of the inlet, quite inaccessible by land and only in touch with the out-

side world by boat. Morning brought a fisherman alongside to offer us his fresh catch, and we paid for it in cigarettes. He rowed off with a parting wink, well satisfied.

Our final rendezvous rid us of the last of our cargo. Although there were no shocks and scares such as were to come later, there was still a strong air of tension throughout the ship. It seemed to fasten on her almost the very second she entered Italian territorial waters and remained with her until she was safely clear of them again. In the months to come, time and experience were to teach that quality of tranquil vigilance which could absorb the recoil of sudden alarms and still leave the brain cold and resourceful.

The return voyage to Tangier was punctuated with several stops. Villefranche saw us for two days, celebrating the success of our first run. Marseilles provided us with some engine spares, and Barcelona gave us shelter from a bad storm whose tremendous seas battered the *Nicotina* ferociously before she reached the protection of the harbour.

The Spanish customs in Barcelona showed an abnormal interest in the *Nicotina*, coming aboard with a comprehensive collection of tools and giving the distinct impression that they intended to take the ship apart, plank by plank. They went through her meticulously, tapping and hammering on her sides for hours, until my curiosity was so aroused that I begged Pete to find out what they were looking for.

The answer proved to be works of art. Only a few days before, a similar ship had entered Barcelona and had been found to have valuable paintings hidden away in spaces cunningly contrived between the two skins of her hull.

The final port of call was Ceuta, where we replenished our almost empty tanks with diesel fuel. Three hours later our anchor was down in Tangier bay.

A fortnight passed while we cleaned up and prepared for the next run. For a couple of days during this time we were marooned aboard by a howling gale which raised the sea in the bay to a frenzy and set the ship rolling almost as badly as she did when under way. The harbour authorities put up signals indicating that nobody must attempt to come ashore, but they had no jurisdiction over visits from one ship to another. Although getting in and out of the wildly capering dinghy was a dangerous game, there was a good deal of

to-ing and fro-ing between the *Nicotina* and the *Pinch of Salt*, anchored nearby.

We suffered a slight accident at this time; a small, steel cargo ship was manoeuvring about, fairly near us, when her engine stopped and refused to restart. In the meantime, she was fast being blown towards us, and there was no time to get our anchor up and move. Fortunately, she dropped her own anchor fairly promptly and it partially checked her so that, when the collision came, it was not a very drastic one. The *Nicotina* lost some paint and a gash was made in her port side, below the waterline. Luckily, only the outer skin of the hull was damaged; the inner skin was still intact and showed no sign of a leak, so we left the repairs until an opportunity arose of taking the ship out of the water.

One calm, sunny afternoon I was "exploring" the bed of the bay, from the dinghy, with Mike. We had slowly made our way, sightseeing through the crystal-clear water as we went, to a point some considerable distance from the *Nicotina*.

Mike spotted an anchor chain lying on the bottom and was immediately fired with the desire to own it. It appeared to be in excellent condition and, as we had two anchors aboard the *Nicotina*, but only one chain, he was determined to try and salvage this one for use with our second anchor.

Where we had first seen it, the chain was much too deep down for us to reach it, so Mike instructed me to perch in the bows of the dinghy and guide him along the course of the chain, in the hope that part of it might be lying in shallower water. Slowly we traced it along the sea bed. It was a difficult task and several times I nearly lost it as it coiled over stony patches. Kneeling in the boat, with my eyes glued to the bottom of the bay and the elusive chain, I called directions to Mike, rowing with his back to me. Suddenly I was startled to see that the chain was rising up through the water. At the same moment, a shadow fell over the dinghy and I looked up to find the bows of the *Nicotina* towering above me. It was our own anchor chain.

Our departure on our second trip was made at midnight, the reason being something to do with avoiding any possible trouble from Spanish patrol boats in the Straits of Gibraltar. This particular stretch of water being narrow, and the Spanish claiming the usual three-mile territorial waters, they virtually controlled the Straits.

They never attempted any nonsense with regular shipping, but they delighted in playing cat and mouse with the smugglers, and many was the ruse that was pulled to fool them.

One of the favourites was to steam out into the Atlantic for a few hours and then turn round and slip through the Straits when not expected. There were agents watching the harbour and bay in Tangier all the time, and they had only to see a ship loading to be on the telephone to Spain in no time flat.

Another dodge was, under cover of darkness, to rig the ship with a great many lights, so that she appeared to be a large vessel. The only other safeguards were adequate speed or else to run the Straits without lights, but this last was a risky business, owing to the likelihood of a collision, and we never tried it.

On this occasion, we got through without being challenged. We ran the Straits at full speed, the engines screeching protestingly at the unusually high revs at which I had set them, and the ship shuddering throughout her whole length as she elbowed the water aside arrogantly and thundered forward. In the excitement of this unusual turn of speed, I had been too busy keeping an eye on the engines to notice the state of the sea. It was not until we were well clear of Spanish coastal waters and had dropped back to normal cruising speed that the effects of a lively sea and a heavingly active ship made themselves known to me. It was raining heavily, too.

Sick and sodden, I sat in my usual place on the ventilator box, facing aft, but the rain was beating straight into my face so I turned round and faced forward, tangling myself all anyhow round the ventilator. I looked up at the mast-head light and watched white rain driving past it, then at green rain where the starboard light was. I could not see which of the crew was at the wheel; from where I sat, the helmsman was concealed by the bulk of the funnel. I leaned over to port, to peer round it, and the *Nicotina* deliberately lurched, so that I went sprawling across the hatch and fetched up against the port ventilator with some violence. I cursed the ship for a spiteful bitch and righted myself.

It was very difficult to keep awake. Listening to the engine exhausts drumming in the funnel, I heard the two voices blend and separate, blend and separate, until I came to know the exact tones and timbres of them, and their balanced, intimate harmony flowed comfortingly round my head. When I began to hear them talking to each other,

question and answer, comment and remark, it was time to be on my feet for the double purpose of waking up and checking round down below.

Painfully the four long hours crawled to their end and I called Fernando to take his watch; and so to my cabin, to fling off the wet oilskins, kick off the heavy boots and fall into my bunk, retaining consciousness only long enough to drag the blankets up to my ears.

Upon arrival in Villefranche, there seemed to be some hitch in the shore organisation's plans and it was not until three days later that we were instructed to proceed to the chosen point. We left the port at ten in the evening and, four hours later, we were in the required position.

The job went well the first night, and we disposed of half the cargo, but the second night held trouble in store for us. We had been lying off the shore, shrouded in the protective darkness and with our engines stilled, for more than three hours. There had been no sign of our contact boats all this time, and they were long overdue at the rendezvous. My nerves felt drawn taut with the strain of this long, tense wait, and I had long since chewed my lips bare of lipstick. Fernando whispered to me to stand by the engine room while he made a quick visit elsewhere.

I stood between the two control panels, feeling in my slacks pocket for my lipstick, when the sky through the open hatchway above my head suddenly erupted into livid, green light. It was the danger rocket sent up by the shore organisation. The lipstick flew from my hand and clattered loudly into the bilges beneath the port engine. At the same moment I heard Luc and Pete shout simultaneously from the bridge, the one in English and the other in French, for full emergency power on both engines. My fingers jabbed fiercely at the starters and both diesels roared into life, the gears slamming into "Ahead" almost before I had released the starter buttons. Vibrating with the maximum thrust from her propellers, the *Nicotina* seemed to pause for a moment, as if bunching her muscles, and then she was moving, picking up speed and tearing towards the safety of open water.

The ghastly, green light which had burst through the hatchway and lit up the engine room with such vivid clarity was momentarily blacked out as Fernando came hurtling down the companion ladder to take over. No sooner had his feet left the ladder than mine were

on it, clawing my way up on deck in a frenzy of haste. The very second that my head cleared the coaming a brilliant, eyeball-searing light assaulted my eyes. A customs launch was right behind us and it was all but treading on our tail.

White water raced by and a thunder of drumming shook the funnel. The ship pulsed and quivered from the force of her engines and threw herself across the sea. The wind tore and ripped at my face and scalp, flinging my hair out in a horizontal tail and sealing my clothes to my body as though they were plastered on.

On we flew over the calm sea, and on came our pursuers, but now the gap was widening. Slowly but surely we hauled away from them, until the probing beam of light no longer blinded, though it still held us. Quite suddenly it swung away, leaving our white hull and arcing round in a vast semicircle. Then it went out altogether. I realised then that we must be outside the three-mile zone.

I heard the engines easing down to their normal cruising speed and, a few moments later, our navigation lights came on. I felt thoroughly relaxed, yet immensely exhilarated, and more at one with the *Nicotina* than ever before. Luc, stepping down from the bridge with a wide grin on his face, stopped to ask how I was feeling. I told him I'd never felt better in my life, and this appeared to amuse him even more. I did not tell him, however, that it was I who had been in the engine room at the time of the crisis. Privately, Fernando and I had agreed that there was little point in bringing this fact to light.

Two more nights were needed to despatch the remainder of our cargo safely ashore, then we turned our bows in the direction of Marseilles to collect another consignment of engine spares, and then set course for our base port. We were in a hurry, because all of us hoped to reach Tangier for Christmas Day. The weather reports were bad, but there was a unanimous vote for having a try at getting back in time.

We headed straight across the Gulf of Lyons and, from the moment we left Marseilles harbour, it was apparent that it was going to be a rough run. For the first couple of hours it was just uncomfortable, then it became very uncomfortable, and I heard the word "mistral" being passed back and forth. Pete explained that this was a diabolical and cruelly cold wind which swept down the Rhone Valley and rampaged about in the Gulf of Lyons. He further re-

marked that it had been known for large ships to disappear, without trace, during a mistral in the Gulf.

The way I was feeling, by the time it grew dark, I would have been delighted to have suffered the same fate. Death seemed infinitely preferable to continued existence in this madly gyrating vessel.

There was no anticipating her next movement. She was like a rabid dog, her bows veering wildly from side to side, rolling, bucking, heaving, twisting and smothered by the tons of water that simply fell on her decks from all points of the compass.

What it must have been like at the wheel was, for me, unthinkable. Several times I was nearly thrown from the ladder as I went up and down on my quarter-hourly visits to the engines. The rest of the time my left arm was wedged tightly round the port ventilator as I sat beside the hatch.

I had every possible piece of clothing on that I could manage to get into. My duffle coat was at least twice its normal weight, owing to saturation by sea water, and the cold was indescribable. It bit at the skin like a burn.

Nobody had ever told me that the Mediterranean could be like this. In common with a lot of people, I had always visualised it as calm and blue, and always drenched in glorious sunshine. This was the rudest contradiction and, in time, I was to learn that the Mediterranean can be as vicious and dangerous as any sea in the world.

Undoubtedly we had been foolish ever to leave Marseilles. After only six hours out, it became very obvious that we could not go on. We were making little headway, even with the engines at revs which would normally have given us our ten knots cruising speed, and they were racing badly as the ship rolled. Furthermore, a return to Marseilles was unthinkable, as that port was now more than six hours away.

Consultation between Luc and Pete, poring over the chart, brought the decision to run for Sete. Altering course accordingly, we spent the next four horrific hours battling our way towards that refuge.

There are no words capable of describing that sea adequately. When my watch ended and Fernando took over, I could not go to my bunk. I stayed on deck, rooted to my perch by fascination and awe.

I was not afraid for myself; the possibility of drowning never held

any terrors for me, but I was mortally afraid for the *Nicotina*. I felt every blow and buffet as though I, personally, was enduring it, and the agony of each wrench and twist of her hull ripped through my own spine. It seemed incredible that she did not break up under this merciless racking. I was afraid for her and proud of her. Only a great little ship, with a great soul, could live in that monumental maelstrom and contain within her gallant hull the safety of the seven specks of humanity to whom she was life itself.

In that elemental frenzy of shrieking mistral, stark darkness and frantic, destructive water, this frail shell of wood stood between her human responsibilities and their extinction.

When Sete was finally reached, and we entered the shelter of the harbour, it was as much as I could do to drag myself to my cabin. Oblivion followed.

The following day revealed that the mistral was still raging, and we all resigned ourselves to the fact that Christmas would have to be spent right where we were. Then and there, we set about plans to make it as convivial an occasion as we could. The day passed in shopping ashore and bringing aboard vast quantities of festive fare, not to mention very abundant supplies of alcohol.

On Christmas Eve the ship was locked up and the whole crew went ashore. Wandering through the town, we heard the sound of carols coming from a nearby church and the magic of the lovely voices, rendering the familiar tunes, lured us into the doorway. The whole place was packed out with people standing everywhere and occupying every square inch.

Noticing a flight of stone steps on our right, we clambered them quietly, our way lit by candles set in niches in the thick, centuries old, stone walls.

We emerged on to a sort of gallery, from which we could look down on the church and, although there was not much room even up here, we somehow squeezed ourselves in and peered over many shoulders to gaze at the brilliant scene below. The church was full of light and it showed the whole spectacle in all its colour and glory.

The choir was chanting, but soon they broke into the melody of "Oh Come, All Ye Faithful" and the whole congregation, ourselves included, joined with them. On my right, Juan was croaking away in his gruff voice, in Portuguese. From behind me came the voices of Fernando and Pedro, singing in Spanish. Luc was giving a fervent

rendering in French, and the choir was singing in Latin, whilst Pete, Mike and I pitched in with plain English.

For a good half hour we sang carols with the French congregation until our throats were dry, and we filed out down the stone steps and into the cold, leaving the service still in progress.

Finding a large café, from which sounds of festivity could be heard, we trooped in and were immediately seated at two tables, pushed together; and there we spent the rest of the evening, wining, dining and watching the cabaret.

At close on midnight, though the fun was still fast and furious in the café, I felt that I had had enough. I was still somewhat shaky in the knees after the recent ordeal, I had a headache and I was extremely tired. I walked slowly back to the ship, escorted by Juan, who beat it back to the party as soon as he had seen me safely aboard.

I stood on the forecastle deck for a few moments, taking deep breaths of the cold night air. The wind was still very high and the sky was blown clear, with gusts of stars spattered over it. Somewhere in the town a church bell with a deep, ringing voice, began to toll the hour of midnight. I wished my ship a happy Christmas, and went to bed.

Christmas Day and Boxing Day aboard the *Nicotina* had much in common with those days in England. On the former, there was the customary over-indulgence in food and drink, and on the latter, the usual attempts to recover therefrom. But there was also quite a lot of activity aboard, for the mistral had about blown itself out and the weather reports were encouraging. Even with a call at Ceuta for more fuel, we would still be in time for New Year in Tangier.

The night we spent in Ceuta harbour produced an entertaining incident involving Mike and Pete. Going ashore after supper, they encountered a convenient bar and went in for a drink. They had not been there long before they were joined by a jovial Spanish gentleman, already well oiled, who insisted that they drink with him. It turned out that their new acquaintance was the skipper of a brand new Spanish destroyer lying in the harbour. Without further ado they were invited back aboard this vessel, the captain taking them straight to his cabin and producing ample supplies of refreshment. Peremptorily he ordered that one of the crew, who was an accomplished guitar player, be hauled from his bunk to entertain the captain and his guests. As the unfortunate fellow had been fast asleep at the time, this could hardly have met with his approval.

Just as the party was really beginning to hot up, the fact that the time was midnight was brought to the captain's attention. In a moment he dropped everything. Orders were rapped out, Mike and Pete were escorted very quickly up on deck and, so Mike said afterwards, the destroyer sailed when he had one foot on the quay and the other still on her deck.

They made their way back to the *Nicotina* and, at this stage, I was woken up by an animated argument proceeding on the quayside. Pete really had caught the party spirit and wanted to wake up the harbour master and bring him aboard for further celebration. Mike had great difficulty in convincing him that, at this time of night, such an invitation would hardly prove popular to a man who would have to start from scratch. Eventually, Pete was persuaded to go to his bunk where, according to Pedro who woke him with a cup of tea in the morning, he had undressed, put on his pyjamas, and then donned a very heavy, navy overcoat before retiring. So he was found, sweltering, for, although it was January, this was Spanish Morocco, and it certainly was not cold.

Back in Tangier once more, Mike pronounced himself dissatisfied with the work we had been doing. The job itself, once we were on it, was satisfactory enough, but he disliked the long, weary voyages there and back. Being discontented, he began to look around for something else and was approached by a Spanish man and wife who wished to charter the ship to take them to Greece. They were out of favour with Franco and it was imperative that they left Tangier as soon as possible. After some parley, it was agreed that we would undertake the job, since they were prepared to pay down half the agreed sum before leaving Tangier, and the balance when they arrived in Athens.

It was real cloak and dagger stuff. They were smuggled aboard, muffled up, at the dead of night, and the *Nicotina* sailed almost immediately they were aboard. Twelve hours later, Spanish police were on their track, but they were too late. The *Nicotina* had sailed.

Two factors prevented me from being with the ship on this voyage. The main one was that my cabin was the most suitable for the charterer and his wife, and the secondary consideration was that, at that time, I was suffering from a certain degree of exhaustion, due to the recent, severe bouts of seasickness I had endured. It was there-

fore decided that I should rest up in Tangier for a few days before flying to Athens and rejoining the *Nicotina*.

In actual fact I got precious little rest. Luc was my constant escort around the night spots and sights of Tangier and, by the time I took off from Tangier Airport, it was merely a different type of exhaustion which stretched me out in my comfortable aircraft seat, to sleep my way to Greece.

5

Interlude—Greece and Malta

THE IMMIGRATION authorities at Athens Airport were abnormally interested in my reasons for coming to Greece. There was a good deal of political unrest in the country at the time, and fighting was going on in the mountains and on some of the islands. In the circumstances, there was understandable suspicion of foreign arrivals.

I explained that I was rejoining a British yacht lying in Piraeus harbour, on which I worked and, after much consultation among themselves, they plastered my passport and visa with many stamps, and let me in.

I found a taxi, aged and ramshackle, but the business of explaining my required destination to the driver was a pantomime of the first order, for I spoke no Greek and he spoke no English. We gesticulated at each other valiantly until a fair-sized crowd had gathered and one of the airline officials, observing the contretemps, acted as an interpreter and straightened out the whole undertaking.

The passengers which the *Nicotina* had carried from Tangier to Greece had already gone ashore by the time I arrived, and Mike had only been waiting for me to put in an appearance before moving the ship out of the commercial port and into the little fishing harbour round the corner.

First impressions, on the morning we moved, were a kaleidoscopic combination of brilliant sunshine, distant mountains, pink, white and brown buildings and a dome of sheer, uninterrupted blue. Looking across the water towards Athens, we could see the Parthenon shimmering in the sunlight.

The harbour was small and compact, sheltered on three sides by land and on the fourth by the harbour wall, with a comparatively narrow entrance.

Along the waterfront were several cafés whose proprietors set their tables and chairs on the shore, among the fishing boats and small

yachts beached there. It was pleasant to sit in the shade of fishing nets, draped out to dry, and drink the local wine, retsina. It tasted strongly of the resin which coated the insides of the barrels in which it matured, but in time I acquired a regrettably enthusiastic taste for it.

Every morning I went on a shopping tour of the village, though the range of food was both limited and expensive. The Greek currency, too, was something of a headache. At the time, the rate of exchange was 20,000 drachmae to one British pound, and even a bus ride into Piraeus cost a bulky wad of 400 drachmae.

There was a good underground system in Athens, but it was not easy to negotiate, owing to my complete ignorance of the Greek language. In the centre of the city was a square whose name resembled "Pneumonia" and it served as a focal point for everywhere else.

One appalling crisis arose out of the language difficulty. Sightseeing in Athens one day I was smitten with the urgent necessity to "spend eighty-four drachmae." There were the public conveniences, certainly, but which was which? Neither of the words emblazoned above the entrances were remotely identifiable as Gents or Ladies. I had, perforce, to wait, in some discomfort and a none too elegant stance, until somebody else decided to go in or come out. At length, a man emerged from one end of the building and I judged it safe to bolt thankfully into the opposite end.

I went to the cinema once, in Athens, and that was enough. The films were all British or American, and the sound tracks were in English with Greek sub-titles. The audience, having no necessity for listening to the sound track, chattered loudly among themselves, making it impossible to hear what was going on, whilst it was equally impossible to understand the sub-titles. The seats were extremely hard, and the floor was bare wood which added to the noise. To crown it all, smoking was not allowed.

On Greek Independence Day there was great celebration. Almost every house flew the blue and white Greek flag, all foreign vessels dressed ship as an act of courtesy, and men sold coloured streamers and paper rosettes in Pneumonia Square. Our ship's chandler told us that, usually, dancing took place in the Square, but owing to the fighting still in progress in the mountains, dancing in public had been forbidden.

During our spell in Piraeus the American fleet paid a visit and

anchored in the bay outside the harbour. Their liberty boats, moving constantly between the ships and the shore, created a tremendous stir and bustle in the normally placid little port.

One morning we noticed a great commotion by the landing stage. A special pontoon had been moored there, a naval detachment was lined up along the shore as a guard of honour, and a band was playing. The occasion was a visit by the King and Queen of Greece to the American fleet.

Another morning a launch carrying some very high-ranking American naval officer fouled the steel cable by which our second anchor held the *Nicotina* in position. Somehow they had managed to wrap their propeller round it and were completely immobile. The officer, red-faced and livid, proceeded to vilify his crew in language which led me to presume that he had no idea a female was within earshot. I sauntered out on to the foredeck and stood regarding their frantic attempts to free themselves, whereupon the officer's eyes lighted upon me and his face became redder than ever. Without another word, he waited in deathly silence whilst his launch was extricated from its predicament.

After a stay of six weeks in Piraeus, Mike decided that it was time to be moving on. He had been recommended to visit Samos, one of the Greek islands about a couple of hundred miles away, and we sailed out of the yacht harbour on a beautiful afternoon towards the end of March.

The seas amongst the many islands we passed were freakish in their behaviour. Crossing between one island and another it was quite rough, with gusts of very cold wind, but passing in the shelter of land it was smooth and steady.

Pedro found it difficult to work in the galley. For perhaps half an hour a deceptive peace would reign, and the only sound was the steady roar from the engine room. Then, without warning, a wind would come storming down some channel and set us rolling again. The pots and pans would clatter, the hull would groan and creak, doors would bang and, as the *Nicotina* lurched and a propeller neared the surface, so the corresponding engine would race, its supercharger screaming like a lost soul. In fact, the whole symphony of rough weather tuned up.

Immediately we had anchored off the town of Vathi, a crowd of officials swarmed aboard, asking all kinds of questions. To our very

great embarrassment, we learnt that the *Nicotina* had run herself straight into a web of distrust and we were all entangled in an extremely delicate position.

We had arrived in Samos at a most critical moment. Two hundred rebels were camped up in the wild, mountainous regions in the interior of the island and, about once in every ten days or so, a band of them would swoop down on the town, at night, and carry off food and other stores, as well as any arms they could lay hands on.

This state of affairs had existed for quite a long time and a curfew was in force in the town. Nobody was allowed on the streets after nine in the evening, except the police and the militia; nor did anybody venture into the interior of the island, for fear of being captured by the rebels.

Only a day or two before our arrival a large detachment of soldiers had been landed to deal with the situation. They were preparing an all-out attack and two warships, which we had passed on our way in, were patrolling round the island to ensure that no rebels escaped in small boats.

All this we gleaned from the Consul, who stupefied us with the information that the authorities suspected the *Nicotina* of coming to the island, in the disguise of a British yacht, in order to help the rebels to escape.

The Consul also gave us the friendly hint that it would be as well to stow our spare fuel drums out of sight. At the time there were eighteen or twenty of these forty-gallon drums lashed on deck at the stern, and he feared that they might attract the attention of the rebels, during their next attack on the town. As these marauding raids took place approximately every ten days, and the last one had been eight days ago, we hastily accepted his advice, emptying all the drums into the ship's tanks and stowing them away in the hold.

This excellent counsel having been acted upon, we were then warned not to become alarmed if we should hear gunfire. The rebels had a penchant for an occasional gun battle with the two warships. Periodically they started firing down into the bay, while the ships steamed up and down, returning the fire.

Sure enough, a couple of afternoons later, we heard some tremendous bangs, and came up on deck to watch the fun. The warships were circling round and round in the bay, firing salvos into the mountains, while answering volleys were landing in the water all

round them. Fortunately, all this went on over our heads and no shells landed very near us, but the situation was not entirely devoid of excitement.

Realising that we were wasting time in Samos, since it was impossible to go sight-seeing, Mike proposed moving on again to a more peaceful spot. From the chart he picked out the tiny island of Leros, some fifty miles away. Pete went ashore to get the health clearance paper but returned, half an hour later, without the paper but with the information that the authorities very much regretted they could not allow us to leave. The offensive against the rebels was about to be launched and they considered it would be wiser for us to remain where we were, for the time being. In spite of the Consul's efforts to reassure them as to our intentions, it seemed that we were still regarded with some doubt.

For three days we kicked our heels and watched the soldiers marching off towards the interior, then straggling back with bunches of prisoners. On the fourth day we were grudgingly allowed to depart, one of the warships escorting us well away from the island.

Passing between the tip of Samos and the Turkish mainland, we sailed serenely into the tiny fishing harbour of Leros and moored alongside the quay. Here all was peaceful and there were no rebels.

The village consisted of a huddle of houses, piled up the hillside, and the whole place swarmed with cats: I never saw so many cats in such a small place. There were one or two little shops, selling vegetables and tinned food, and a tiny post office which was only in touch with the mainland, by radio, three days a week. A small boat called once a week with passengers and mail. The people were obviously poor but they had a tremendous fund of kindness and goodwill; the woman in the grocery shop, for instance, insisted on sending her small son to carry my shopping baskets back to the *Nicotina* every morning. Nor would she accept any payment for the valuable service, so I rewarded the child with sweets and chocolate.

The island was so small that it was possible to walk right round it in an afternoon. In parts it was very wild, with sheep and goats grazing on the rough, hilly pasture. The first time I went exploring, one sunny, gloriously still afternoon, I had a poignant experience which was as unexpected as it was unforgettable.

I had taken the dusty, white road which ran along the shoreline all

round the island. Rounding a rocky corner I was surprised to see the Union Jack flying from a tall, white flagpole in the distance; then, as I approached it, I realised why it was there.

Surrounded by an immaculate, white-painted fence was a plot of ground entirely occupied by war graves; row upon row of them, each was marked, at the head, by a small, wooden cross. Leading from the little gate into the cemetery itself was a neat, pebble path, and each grave was separated from its neighbour by the same, beautifully maintained pathways. There was not a weed to be seen and the place was gay with flowers, some planted on the graves and some in glass bottles and jars, while the foot of the enclosing fence was lined with them.

I opened the gate and walked slowly between the graves, looking at the names on the crosses. There must have been over two hundred of them there, mostly of Army men, but there were a few Royal Air Force ones, and two or three Royal Navy ones. Some of the crosses were simply marked "Unknown."

Hearing footsteps behind me, I turned and saw a very old Greek and his wife coming out of a cottage which stood just outside the fence. They spoke no English but, by signs, they explained to me that they looked after the cemetery and that, every morning and at every sunset, they raised and lowered the British flag. Probably the old couple took me for a relative. Mercifully, I was not, but had it been the case, sorrow could only have been eased and lightened by the beauty of such a resting place and the obvious devotion of the Greek couple who cared for it.

Subdued by the impact, yet conscious of the peace and tranquillity, I said good-bye and walked quietly through the gate and back on to the roadway.

A day or two later we left Leros and headed for our last Greek port of call, Rhodes.

This island was different again from the other places we had visited. It was much busier than Samos or Leros, and yet it was not quite like the mainland. It was tidier and cleaner than anywhere else we had been in Greece, for one thing, and the harbour was of ample proportions and very well sheltered.

The town itself was quite large and beautifully laid out, with an impressive Palace of Justice and other handsome public buildings. The streets were wide and well paved, and there was a big market

close to the harbour, which made the food problem both easier and cheaper, by reason of the wider variety of goods available.

I shopped every morning, generally taking Pedro with me, for Rhodes, having been Italian before the war, had many Italian-speaking people, and Pedro could manage that language quite well.

The old town of Rhodes was contained within high walls and guarded by a formidable castle. So thick were the walls in some parts that shops were actually built into them.

Meandering out on deck after breakfast one morning I was surprised to see a destroyer anchored outside the harbour. The Royal Navy had arrived on a courtesy visit.

The harbour master promptly arranged a cocktail party for the officers of H.M.S. — to which Mike, Pete and I were invited, and we soon made the acquaintance of several of the destroyer's personnel. Having done so, we never looked back; there were some very hilarious parties, both aboard the *Nicotina* and in the town, and it was a day of gloom and despondency when H.M.S. — sailed for her next port of call.

Some time during the weeks we spent in Rhodes, I decided to have a permanent wave and found a hairdressing establishment in a small street behind the market. To reach the salon itself, it was necessary to climb one of those winding, wrought iron sets of stairs before emerging into one huge room, devoid of cubicles, where the whole business was conducted. While I sat awaiting my turn, I noticed a row of wooden chairs along one wall, all occupied by elderly ladies, dressed from head to foot in black, and all knitting or sewing industriously. I assumed that they, too, were awaiting attention, but the hairdresser beckoned me to a seat and set about his work without taking any notice of them. Much later I learnt from the Consul that I had committed an appalling indiscretion by going to the hairdresser's without a chaperone.

We accomplished an act of rescue one morning when Juan came to my cabin with something cradled in his hand which consisted, mainly, of two enormous, tawny-coloured eyes, and a few bedraggled feathers. It was a baby owl which he had found floating on the water. We put him in a wooden box and left him in the warm, spring sunshine to dry.

There was much rejoicing and merry-making in the town when the Greek King and Queen paid a visit to the island and stayed for

several days in the castle. The streets were decorated with flags and bunting, bands played and there was much drinking of "oozo." This was an extraordinary beverage, quite new to me; it looked like gin when poured from the bottle but, when water was added, it turned milky white.

Soon, Mike began to think about making another move. The *Nicotina* badly needed dry-docking, her engines would soon be due for an overhaul and, after a year's cruising, she wanted a good spring clean and a coat or two of fresh paint. Malta, some six-hundred miles away, was the obvious place for such labours.

At seven fifteen on a bright May morning we sailed through the harbour entrance, astride which the Colossus of Rhodes was fabled to have stood, and gradually Rhodes faded into the distance behind us.

About twenty-four hours later we found that we had two stowaways on board. One was a small Greek mouse, who had taken up his quarters in the galley, and the other was a beautiful little brown bird with a green breast, about the size of a sparrow. He flew about the ship from end to end, thoroughly enjoying his free ride, and eventually became bold enough to fly right into Mike's cabin through the open doors to the bridge. This delighted Mike, who immediately put down some crumbs for him.

The following day a rather more ominous passenger appeared. He was a small but very handsome hawk, who landed on the *Nicotina* with an air of great exhaustion. All that day he sat on a rope at the stern and rested. If anybody approached him he flew off, but always circled and came back to his perch on the rope. Towards evening it became obvious that he had his eye on our little brown and green passenger for supper, the latter becoming very alarmed and dodging nervously all over the ship. Finally, the little fellow took refuge in Mike's cabin, where the hawk did not dare to follow him.

Unfortunately and unwittingly I was the cause of the tragedy. Forgetting that the little bird would probably be in there, I pulled open the wheelhouse door of Mike's cabin to tell him that supper was ready. The bird took fright and flew straight out of the bridge doors. In a moment the hawk was after him. They flew off over the sea, the smaller bird keeping low, twisting and turning. Then he swung round and seemed to be making a last, desperate effort to get back to the safety of the cabin. They came nearer and nearer and, at

first, it looked as if the little chap might make it; but the hawk was very hungry and his superior speed and strength were telling. He dived at last and caught his victim in his claws; then he flew round to the stern and settled again on his rope perch, standing on one foot and holding the small body in the other.

In a vain bid to rescue the little bird, Mike crept very quietly round the dinghy and succeeded in getting behind the hawk without it being aware of the fact. Holding my breath, I watched as Mike advanced, inch by inch, and grabbed the hawk from the rear. It could do nothing, as Mike had pinioned its wings, but it glowered at him with its tiny, ferocious eyes and showed no fear; nor did it let go of its prey for one instant. A quick glance was sufficient to tell Mike that the little bird was dead, and there was nothing to be done for him. Mike let the hawk go, and he flew off to continue his meal elsewhere on the ship. He must have been desperate with hunger because he recovered noticeably after feeding, and by night-fall he had gone on his way.

Four hours on and four hours off, so Fernando and I maintained our engine room watches whilst Mike, Pete and Juan alternated in three-hour watches at the wheel. Pedro toiled in his galley on a less exacting time schedule, but his night's sleep was broken up into short spells by the duty of providing coffee or soup each time the watches changed.

Only the *Nicotina* never slept. Steadily she sped over the waters, leaving the miles behind her in their hundreds until, soon after daybreak on a crystal clear, windless morning, she brought us to Malta.

Approaching the entrance to Grand Harbour, a light, high up above it, began to flash and blink at us. As on previous occasions, we just pretended not to see it, and sailed blithely into the harbour.

There was not a single warship in sight, much to my disappointment; apparently all the big stuff, which normally lay in Grand Harbour, was out on some exercise. We dropped anchor and moored stern on to the quay at the Crucifix Hill steps.

About six in the evening, just as I was stepping out of the engine room hatch in all the glory of boiler suit, filthy face and oily hands, a dghaisa arrived alongside our gangway. I was hailed by a spruce and spotless officer who proved to be one of our friends from H.M.S. — whom we had met in Rhodes. She was lying in Sliema Creek,

where all the destroyers and frigates were berthed, and our visitor casually remarked, over a drink, that it would be rather pleasant if we could move the *Nicotina* round there. Apparently there were a couple of Fairmile-sized berths off Manoel Island, very close to the slipways, and it sounded an excellent idea in theory. But we were doubtful about getting official permission to lie there, as it was not the custom for private yachts to berth in Sliema Creek.

The next morning revealed that the fleet was in port again, very much so; an aircraft carrier was moored to a couple of buoys dead ahead of us, and the disturbing thought suddenly struck me that, in point of fact, she was lying plumb over the spot where we had so cheerfully dropped our anchor in the then empty harbour.

Mike went ashore and tracked down the various officials concerned with the slipway on Manoel Island. The Navy had a number of reserve Fairmiles in Malta, and these were being slipped and overhauled, one by one. Only with the greatest difficulty was he able to persuade the authorities to allow us the use of the slipway for the *Nicotina*, and we could not get a booking for at least four weeks. It was the fact that we were covered by our insurance for the repairs to the hull, after the accident in Tangier bay, which finally swayed the official decision in our favour.

The move to Sliema Creek was not without incident. We began to winch the anchor chain in, letting go our stern ropes, and slowly, slowly, the ship inched forward, engines idling, as more and more chain came in. Closer ar¹ closer we came to the aircraft carrier. A crowd of vociferously commenting sailors had lined her deck and were peering down upon us, having a grandstand view of our efforts to extricate the *Nicotina* from this somewhat hot-under-the-collar situation. I thought that anchor was never coming up. At long last, when our bows were directly under the carrier's overhanging flight deck, it broke clear of the bottom and the *Nicotina* went astern.

Seeking a means of getting our own back on the carrier's crew, I raced to our stern and quickly lowered the Red Duster in salute as we passed them. That caught them unawares. Probably they had been so unimpressed by our up-anchoring capers that they never dreamed we would trouble to observe such a civility as saluting them. A rating could be seen hot-footing it along the flight deck to their white ensign which, rather belatedly, he lowered and then raised again, in acknowledgement of our salute; honours were now even.

We sailed out of Grand Harbour and turned to port, round the coast of the island, until we came to the entrance of Sliema Creek, up which we proceeded with as much dignity as we could muster. There were, however, quite a number of destroyers and frigates in the Creek on this particular day, and conscientiously I saluted each one as we went by. The proper technique, I had read, was to lower your ensign and then wait until the man o'war in question had both lowered and raised her ensign in return, before raising your own again. Some of the ships were quicker than others in acknowledging our salute and this threw me into chaos. Once or twice I was still awaiting a reply from one ship when we were actually opposite the next one.

It was kindly explained to me later that I should simply have brought the ensign down and left it down, from the time we entered the Creek until we arrived at our berth.

Picking up the moorings, just off Manoel Island, was a new technique to the *Nicotina*. Two large buoys lay in the water, topped by huge iron rings. We had to position the ship between them and make our stern and bow fast by passing lines through the rings and back up to the deck.

We lay in Sliema Creek for several weeks, waiting our turn to go up on the slip, and were in daily touch with our friends in H.M.S. —. She was only a few hundred yards away from us, directly across the Creek, and we could always count on somebody dropping aboard for a morning reviver, just before lunchtime. Equally, we were frequently invited aboard the destroyer for dinner and a film show on deck, in the cool, open air of the evening, often with a cinema ceiling of stars.

The only drawback to this, so far as I was concerned, was the necessity of wearing an evening dress. Accustomed for so long to slacks, shorts or a boiler suit, I had completely lost the ability to move about in a floor-length skirt. Teetering up and down ships' gangways in this kind of rig was a nightmare; even in a flat calm it was a hazardous business, but if there was the slightest chop on the water it was a real ordeal.

My dress itself had been stuffed away in my trunk, which was in turn wedged beneath my bunk. Perhaps this treatment had been unwise, but I shy away from formal occasions like a china shop from a bull, and it had never occurred to me that I might actually have to

wear the thing. All the skill of the best cleaners in Valletta was needed to restore it to a presentable state.

One of the most amazing sights I ever saw was a destroyer, in a floating drydock, with about ten feet of her bows smashed right back and pointing towards her stern along the starboard side. She had been involved in a high-speed collision with another destroyer, during a night exercise, fortunately with no loss of life. It was not until I examined this ship that I realised how thin and comparatively fragile is the hull of a destroyer.

Walking through Valletta one morning I noticed that a lot of church bells were ringing and then, as I rounded a corner into a main street, I saw a procession approaching. It was led by youngsters dressed in their best, followed by priests in full regalia, and followed in turn by ordinary folk, also in their Sunday clothes. To my extreme discomfiture, everyone on the pavement around me fell on their knees as the procession passed. I could not think what to do. Even in the panic of the moment I could not bring myself to kneel.

About-turning, I escaped down the side road from which I had emerged and skulked there until the procession was well past and people were walking about again. Then I discovered that all the shops were closed, so no shopping could be done anyway.

A courtesy which we made an effort to observe was the raising and lowering of our ensign, morning and evening, in concert with the naval ships. Being in a rather privileged position, lying in Sliema Creek, I felt that the least we could do was to conform to the naval procedure. The morning ceremony was at 8 a.m., but several times I was caught out and couⁿt be seen tearing down the deck towards the stern, once with a hair brush still in my hand, while everyone else was a good half-way through the routine.

We also dressed ship when the occasion arose. This happened twice during our stay in Malta, once on the King's official birthday, and once when some Italian admiral came on a visit. It was a pleasure to do it for the King, but my feelings towards the Italian admiral, so recently a foe, and into whose country I had been busy smuggling cigarettes, were not nearly so enthusiastic. But the Navy said so—and the *Nicotina* complied.

At last we received word that our turn had come to go up on the slip and to prepare the ship accordingly. A gang of workmen came aboard and warped her through the water, from buoy to buoy, until

she was positioned directly above the cradle, which ran down beneath the water on rails. Having once got the ship lodged safely in the cradle, she was hauled bodily up the slope and clear out of the water. Throughout the operation I was afloat in the canoe, feverishly taking pictures, but the camera got soaked and the film was ruined.

Once up on the slip work really began. The sooner we were off it again, the better, but what we saw on the bottom of the *Nicotina* gave us quite a shock. There were long, trailing weeds, hundreds of barnacles and numerous other specimens of marine garbage. The hull was scraped clean of all this junk and then carefully examined to see whether the teredo, a worm which attacks and riddles wooden hulls, had done much damage. There was practically none, probably due to the excellent anti-foul paint which we had used on the bottom of the ship twelve months before.

The damage to the hull was examined and repaired, and two further coats of anti-foul paint applied, again in a deep red colour. With this, and a couple of fresh coats of white above the waterline, she was as good as new.

Two days after the *Nicotina* had returned to her natural habitat, Mike received an urgent call to fly to the south of France. He was away for only three days, but during that time I thoroughly enjoyed kidding myself that the *Nicotina* was all mine.

I was beginning to idolise her, anyway; for months I had felt her influence over me slowly increasing, felt her drawing me always closer and closer to herself. Perhaps I was becoming unbalanced about the whole thing, I did not know. I only knew that, from the moment when she had first lifted to the seas, she had taken first place in my life, had slowly consolidated that position, and now enslaved me. I had come to love her more than I had ever loved anything or anybody in my whole life. She bullied me, she made me ill, she chucked me around as though she cared nothing for me, she soothed me, mothered me and, most telling of all, she demanded, and got, the best out of me. She fashioned me into a creature aware of the fragility of life and the insecurity of human relationships.

Under her influence, as by now I most surely was, I came to know myself as nothing, nothing at all in the immensity of the oceans, the skies, planets, stars, universe. She had taught me to love those things which are permanent, which can never change; the seas, the winds,

sunshine, driving rain, and the great river where she herself had been born. She was my passport to emotional freedom, though, strangely, a lot of this was never clarified in my mind until long after she had gone, impermanent herself, but the instrument of my release.

Then it was, years later, that I went back to her birthplace, drawn irresistibly to that river, and found that I could once again have a part in the things in which she had instructed me. But that is another story, yet to be told.

The three days and nights for which I had her to myself were idyllic. I was thoroughly spoilt by the H.M.S. — crowd, taken ashore to parties in the evenings, or for drives round the island. I went midnight swimming at Peter's Pool, dancing, playing tombola and indulging in beer-drinking races at a party one Saturday night. But above all this, I had the *Nicotina* to come home to on the quiet, starry nights, and I could fall asleep in the illusion that she was my ship and that we would roam the seas of the world for all our days.

Disillusion came quickly enough when Mike returned.

Soon our Malta holiday drew to a close. The *Nicotina* was ready for work again and we were running low on shekels. At 2.30 p.m. on a scorching afternoon we let go the two buoys and turned our bows down Sliema Creek towards the open sea, our ultimate destination Villefranche.

The island sank slowly out of sight as the white wake of the ship churned out behind her. I stood on the foredeck. A slight roll was already apparent, and I flexed my knees automatically. The freshness of the morning was still in the air, clean, cool, the sun beating down from a sky of the traditional blue.

The Mediterranean heaved, green and undulating, and, as the *Nicotina* went on her way, the twin reverberations of the engines were a roar of freedom. She had been too long at her moorings and now she throbbed with her own life again and surged on her joyful way out to sea.

The narrow Straits of Messina proved to be the first and worst hazard of the voyage. There was an enormous ferry boat to be avoided, which carried passengers and cars, not to mention a whole train, between Sicily and the toe of Italy.

As we were negotiating the Straits at night, we were badly handicapped by the phenomenal number of small fishing boats working

there. They were so numerous, and their lights were so glaring, that it was very difficult to distinguish between them and the lights on the shore, by which we were trying to navigate. To add to the confusion, some of the boats carried no lights at all, and the likelihood of running one or more of them down was extremely strong.

It was a nerve-wracking experience. We crawled along on one engine, picking our way through the small boats with infinite caution, the whole crew out on deck, keeping a sharp look-out ahead of us. Slowly we inched our way through the packed throng. At one point the lights were massed so solidly in front of us that it looked as though the *Nicotina* was either about to run straight up a main street, or else she was heading into so heavy a concentration of fishing boats that she could not possibly avoid touching them. I visualised nets and lines chewed up in our propellers, and various other nightmarish possibilities, before we finally cleared the last boat and were through. Then we opened up our engines and headed for less crowded waters.

We were bound for Ischia and our arrival there occurred during the hours of darkness. According to the pilot book, there were several obstacles in the harbour, such as sunken ships left over from the war, and we entered extremely gingerly. Nobody paid any attention to us, so we sorted out a place to drop anchor and tie up, stern on to the quay.

About 3.30 a.m. we went to our bunks, only to be woken, three hours later, by an irate harbour master who informed us that we had no business to be lying in the fishing fleet's berth, and ordered us to move, forthwith, to the other side of the harbour.

After that came breakfast, then a visit ashore for some fresh provisions. On my return to the ship, I changed into a sunsuit and lay out on deck. This particular outfit was of the two-piece variety, leaving the midriff bare, and I had not worn it for quite a long time, as such garments had been strictly taboo in Malta. Like a fool, I fell asleep, stretched across the cargo hatch, and did not waken until Pedro called me for lunch at about 1 p.m. But the damage was already done.

The strip of skin across my diaphragm, covered from the sun for so long, had taken a fearful beating. It was already scarlet and I knew, as I went to my cabin to clothe myself for the meal, that I was in for trouble. And so I was. Although I plastered myself with every-

thing I could lay hands on which might conceivably ward off sunburn, that night is still painfully vivid in my recollections. I slept not at all; it was as if a white-hot bar of metal was pressed tightly against me. I twisted this way and that, trying to find relief and failing; my head ached, I felt dizzy, and life was intolerable. It was a hot, airless night, to make matters worse, and not until the dawn was sneaking in did I drop off into a restless kind of doze, the sort of semi-consciousness in which I was aware that I was asleep.

Two days later we were on our way again, with the intention of making for Corsica, but heavy weather hit us and we pulled into a small bay for shelter, only some eight hours after leaving Ischia. This was Porto Ercole, a tiny village sprawled upon the hillside and round the edge of the bay. There was no harbour, but we anchored in the bay, comfortably sheltered from the fury raging outside.

I went ashore and meandered through the dusty streets of the village, shopping here and there. On my way, I came upon an old man, sitting outside his house cobbling a net. He passed the time of day with me, as I neared him, and politely invited me to sit down, indicating a large stone beside him. He "had a little English," as the expression goes, and he told me something of his life.

His family had been fishermen for generations, but his only son had been killed in North Africa. He also had been a fisherman, and a good one. He had not wanted to go and fight. They were poor people, but "they" had come for him and told him that he must go into the army and fight, so he had gone and never come back.

It was the same, I told him, with a family I knew in England. They, too, had had a son who had gone to the war and never come back. And this son, also, lay in North Africa.

The old Italian gazed out over the bay for a long time before he spoke again.

"You come from the sea, and you will go back to the sea again, and we shall not even know our names. But it is good that we meet and talk like this. For what was it done? Everything is the same. We are still poor, and our life is not changed, nor better, as 'they' said it would be, after the war. Only my son is dead, and so our family stops. Why?"

I could not answer him. As I rose to go, he pointed to a hill above the bay which was crowned by an old, long-disused fort.

"Walk up there, signorina," he said. "It is high and you will see

far, very far. Perhaps you will even see what is real." Then, after another pause, "Your ship is a good ship. I never saw any ship with her look before."

I did as he said, clambering up the steep slope until I arrived, out of breath, at the fort. It was a ruin, walls crumbling and what had been a tower lying in a pile of shattered stones on the ground. But the view was magnificent.

Far away, out to the horizon, the gale was whipping the waves. The clouds were speeding across the sky and the boisterous wind flattened the rough, tufty grass around me and tried to flatten me with it. Down in the shelter of the bay lay the *Nicotina*, tiny and insignificant from this vantage point, yet the focus of my world and life.

Even up here I could feel her pull on me and her natural intimacy with the elements. I wondered how I had managed to exist for so long without this freedom of spirit that I knew at sea and in this ship. And so it was as the old man had said, I indeed saw what was real.

On leaving Porto Ercole, forty-eight hours later, we cut across in the direction of Corsica, and, after a day of fairly bouncy progress, we entered the harbour of Bastia and tied up for the night.

Mike, Pete and I went ashore for a meal, and then sat on the front, drinking coffee and brandy, and watching the people strolling to and fro in the warm dusk. A band played somewhere in the distance, and the azure of the daytime sky deepened slowly through the pinks, mauves and purples of evening into the final, midnight blue. All was very well with the world.

Very early morning saw us pulling out of Bastia and skirting the pointing finger of Corsica before setting our course in the direction of the South of France and Villefranche.

On our way we sighted whales—quite a lot of them, and big ones, too. Mostly they were lying asleep on the surface of the water, but if we tried to come in close for a better look at them they would very speedily wake up and submerge, only to surface miles away.

Cap Ferrat duly appeared. The *Nicotina* entered the bay and sidled into the old harbour with an air of knowing that Villefranche was now her home port and the base for all her future operations.

Back to Contraband

WE HAD not been berthed in Villefranche for thirty-six hours before we were approached with an offer of work. News of our arrival had percolated along the coast to our old friends, André and Louis, in Nice, and they came along to see us one Sunday morning.

Having inspected the *Nicotina* whilst she was still converting and refitting in England, they already knew her capacity. Their suggestion was that they should pay us a retainer fee to stand by in case the ship currently working for them broke down. She had been having intermittent spells of engine trouble and they were not very happy about her.

At the time, there did not seem to be any particular urgency. André and Louis merely confirmed with Mike the conditions under which they would be prepared to charter the *Nicotina*, the main one being that they would be putting their own crew aboard, and the amount of the retainer fee was discussed and agreed.

More important, they had to explain the new set-up to us. When we had last worked in the business, we had done it in "long haul style," in other words, collecting the cargo direct from Tangier ourselves, bringing it the one thousand-odd miles up to the Gulf of Genoa, and delivering it to the contact boats. Then, empty, we would make the long, weary trek back to Tangier.

It had been quite legal and permissible, in those days, for us to enter harbour in France with our cargo aboard, provided we declared it immediately and the French customs sealed it up. Crews were usually pretty good about this, since they realised the advantages of being able to sit cosily in port, ready laden, whilst arrangements were made, just "around the corner," for the actual landings.

During our absence in Greece and Malta, however, there had been some kind of rumpus raised, as the Italian authorities resented the

ease with which we could sit, virtually on their doorstep, and plan our rendezvous at leisure and in comfort. The French Government had therefore brought out a new regulation that no ship under 100 tons nett was permitted to enter a French port carrying contraband. Of course, this was specifically aimed at us, since none of us could lay claim to anything like that tonnage.

To meet this new complication, other measures had to be employed and the system which finally evolved was that of using a much larger ship, something of the minesweeper class, as a kind of floating store, which would bring the cargo up from Tangier to a rendezvous some twenty or thirty miles out in the Gulf of Genoa. We would then collect the cargo from her, two or three hundred cases at a time, and carry on with the deliveries as before.

The depot ship, as she was known, remained at sea throughout the operation, sometimes sitting it out, in all weathers, for as much as three weeks.

It had to be admitted that a certain amount of inconvenience resulted from this new arrangement, which doubtless afforded the Italians great satisfaction. But if they imagined that we would be deterred from pressing on with the good work, they were much mistaken. The skippers on this job were determined men, and equal to all the difficulties that both the greater enemy, the sea, and the lesser one, the Italian customs, could offer. The combination of both was, at times, somewhat taxing on their resourcefulness but the fact that the cargoes continued to go in spoke for itself.

A few days later, Louis materialised on the quay at the crack of dawn with dire news from their shore contacts in Italy. Their ship, the *Four Hands*, had broken down again and was hobbling towards home on one engine with some two hundred cases still on board. The *Nicotina* would have to go out, more or less immediately, take over the cargo and finish the job.

There was a tremendous uproar of preparation. Our own crew had to be paid off and despatched on their respective ways; food, water, fuel and oil had to be organised.

Somehow, by evening, all was accomplished, and we lay at the ready. Louis and André came aboard and spent the night on the saloon settees, waiting for news of their ship and cargo. They had sent out a small launch as a messenger and, about 4 a.m., she returned to the harbour and tied up alongside us with the information

that the *Four Hands* was lying some ten miles off Villefranche, awaiting assistance.

I had slept fitfully that night, with one ear cocked for the return of the messenger boat, and half an hour after her arrival we were moving. With Mike at the wheel, myself in the engine room, and Louis and André acting as temporary deck-hands, the *Nicotina* sallied forth, her decks still wet with the night's dew.

Fortunately, the weather was reasonably good and the sea quite calm by the time we sighted the *Four Hands*. When we were still some distance from her, she exchanged recognition signals with us and began moving to meet us. As soon as the two ships were close enough, her owner leapt aboard the *Nicotina* and an agitated conference ensued between him and André, presumably about his ship's engines and their failings.

Meanwhile, the skipper on the *Four Hands* shouted to Mike to stop engines and just let the *Nicotina* lie, while he brought the *Four Hands* parallel with us. All the fenders that we could lay hands on were brought into use and we lined the port side with them as the *Four Hands* edged in. Skilfully her skipper manœuvred her alongside, and the two ships were tied loosely together.

The *Four Hands'* crew already had the cases up on deck and they now began hurling them over on to the *Nicotina*. They landed all anyhow and anywhere. Agility was vital, in order not to be felled to the deck, and speed was the essence of the job, since the sooner the transfer was accomplished, the sooner the two ships could separate and it would be safer all round.

I never did get to like this method of loading, with two ships being close alongside, in the open sea. It was a dangerous business, at the best of times, and a catastrophe could happen too quickly.

Once the cargo had been pitched, higgledy piggledy on to the decks of the *Nicotina*, sundry pieces of personal baggage came raining down on top of the cases. Their owners followed, and I was able to take my first look at the French crew with whom I was to work for the rest of my smuggling life.

First aboard was the skipper, Jacques, about twenty-eight years of age, of medium height and fair-haired, with a powerful pair of shoulders and arms. He had a pleasant face with a very strong jaw-line, and it was abundantly obvious from the start that he was accustomed to giving orders and having them carried out.

The first thing he did, upon boarding the *Nicotina*, was to give me a ferocious glare. Then he greeted Louis and André, was introduced to Mike, and they conferred for some time, while the owner of the *Four Hands* returned to his own ship to take control.

Next across came a woman, little Marie, wife of the engineer, and the ship's cook. It was immediately apparent that she was not very confident about crossing from one heaving deck to the other but, after dithering on the brink for a few moments, she made the leap, her husband encouraging her from behind and Jacques, already aboard the *Nicotina*, standing ready to grab her.

Very small, she was only about five foot nothing, but strong and durable, she did not seem to know what seasickness was. She fed us with regularity and, in rough weather, with heroism. Nothing that the *Nicotina* could do would keep her out of the galley. Even if it was really bad, she could still manage hot soup all round, and the scorching cups of coffee that she brewed for us all at the end of a night's work, were nectar.

She had long, black hair which she tied back from her face, and dark, brilliant eyes which missed very little. In old shirts of Pierre's, and slacks or shorts, she ruled the galley and our appetites, and ruled them well. We never went hungry and how she fed us sometimes, when rations were running low, was nothing short of miraculous.

She was followed by her husband, Pierre, the engincer, a wiry, olive-skinned, black-haired man with a small moustache and permanently oil-stained hands. To my immense astonishment he had a small dog tucked under his arm. This was Balik.

He was of Arab nationality, delicately boned, and had a close-fitting coat resembling a tawny tweed. His little face was sharp with intelligence and he had big, black eyes out of all proportion to his size. Never was there a dog quite like Balik. For one thing, being a professional smuggler made him a cut above all other dogs and, for another, he was a sailor at heart and understood the business very well.

Following in the wake of Balik came the fourth member of the crew, Jean, who undertook general deck duties, including taking the wheel. He was a gay, twenty-year-old youngster, well built, blue eyed and with curly fair hair cropped very close to his head. He was a happy-go-lucky lad, though he could, on occasion, present a serious front. There was something basically optimistic about him;

perhaps he was just a fatalist, but even in the stickiest situations he always remained cool and faintly amused.

The fifth and final member of the crew was Boris. His duties were those of supercargo, as had been Luc's on our previous runs, and he also pitched in and helped on deck, took his turn at the wheel with Jean and Jacques and, of course, dealt with all the business side of the operations. Amongst his many qualifications, he had an uncommonly sharp eye for spotting a phoney dollar bill. In leisure hours, if he had any forged dollars to hand, he would sit on deck and instruct me in distinguishing them from real ones.

He was a massively built man with very heavy shoulders, a deep chest and a Nordic head. He was equally useful at the wheel or working with the ropes and fenders, and could even turn his hand to affairs in the galley, if need be, but he drew the line at the engine room and flatly refused to have anything to do with the mechanics of the ship.

At length, their discussions concluded, Louis signalled to the *Four Hands* to come alongside and take himself and André off. Gingerly, her owner now at the wheel, she crept alongside us so that they could make the jump, then she opened up her one engine and crawled away.

It was immediately obvious that neither Louis nor André had taken the trouble to inform Jacques that I "went with the ship," for he leapt to the rail as the distance between the *Four Hands* and ourselves increased, and shouted across the gap, at the same time gesticulating wildly in my direction. With a typically Gallic shrug, Louis waved once in farewell and turned his back on us. André had already disappeared, tactfully, behind the cover of the *Four Hands'* funnel. Clearly, Jacques had originally thought that I had just come out for the ride and would be returning to Villefranche in the *Four Hands* with André and Louis.

Realisation that he was lumbered with me for the trip caused him to glower furiously at me, and the atmosphere for the first day or two was somewhat strained, particularly at mealtimes, these being occasions on which we were necessarily in close contact, round the saloon table. The rest of the time I kept well out of his way.

As the *Four Hands* receded into the distance we set our course for the Gulf of Genoa and, whilst Pierre and I were conferring in the engine room, the rest set about reorganising the cases, which were lying all anyhow about the decks.

Methodically they were sorted and stacked across the stern and along the port and starboard quarters, two and three deep, and four cases high. As we expected to unship them that night, there seemed little point in heaving them all down into the hold and then fetching them up again that evening.

By early afternoon we were in position in the Gulf of Genoa at a spot some twenty miles off shore, and Marie served a late lunch. It was quite calm enough for the *Nicotra* to lie with engines stopped for the rest of the afternoon and early evening, while we all retired to our respective bunks for some rest.

Marie, who would have comparatively little to do during the night, was put on watch during the few, short hours of relaxation and she stationed herself on a pile of cases, adding a delightful touch of domesticity to the scene by bringing Pierre's socks on deck with her to be darned.

At suppertime I volunteered to eat my food on deck and take over the watch. There was something fascinating about sitting in the middle of the sea, miles from anywhere, eating a meal and watching the sun subsiding over the horizon and the sky merging at last with the sea in one great expanse of blue-black.

Furthermore, the atmosphere in the saloon was considerably strained, Jacques not yet having acclimatised himself to the acquisition of a female second engineer, and I sought to avoid any further brush with him.

A couple of hours' cruising and we were crossing the three-mile limit. I called Pierre, but he was already awake and joined me quickly in the engine room. I went on deck and stood looking up at the mast as the huge cross of it swayed across the sky. The stars were out now and, as we approached the land, I could see lights twinkling.

Some half-mile off shore, Jacques eased the engines down and put them both into neutral. Picking up his glasses, he scanned the shoreline and then the entire 360 degrees all round us, before turning to the shore again and then instructing Jean to pass the "Stop Engines" order down to Pierre.

As the rumbling and muttering died away and all was silent, it seemed as if a heavy weight was pressing down on the ship. We lay quietly, the swell taking possession of us and turning us so that it could, the more conveniently, roll us. As the roll increased there were occasional bangs from below decks and I went through the ship,

checking on any doors which had not been either hooked back or closed.

The galley contributed a certain amount of unavoidable noise; pots and pans swayed back and forth with the roll, and squeaked against the bulkhead on which they hung. Dishes in their enclosed cupboards rattled from side to side and the empty kettle was sliding back and forth on the top of the stove. I took it off and hung it on a hook.

In the engine room there was not much to be heard, only the occasional clink of tools from their built-in sockets, and the soft slither of a piece of rubber hose scraping back and forward as it hung from the fuel tank. Standing in the passage through the tank bay I could hear the fuel swishing about in the tanks and the door to the wardroom was off its hook and banging about. I closed it and then returned on deck through the open wardroom hatch.

Nothing happened. I sat with my back to the funnel, on the engine-room coach roof, my hands jammed into the pockets of my slacks, while my stomach was invaded by small darts of nervousness which gradually built up into one big quiver.

Then I heard it, the sound of engines approaching from the direction of the shore. Jacques had heard it too, and had called, quietly, for the engines to be started. They roared into life, then sank back to their idling mutter, but in a few moments I saw a small light blinking at us, and our engines were stopped again. Very shortly afterwards the contact boats were alongside. A man clambered aboard the *Nicotina* and was immediately borne away by Boris, who took him off below, to count out the cash.

The crew set to work, transferring our cargo to the two contact boats, which were both alongside, one ahead of the other, and there was considerable comment from the Italian crews on the subject of this new ship. Some of it became rather loud and excited and twice Jacques had to hiss at them to keep their voices down.

To our disappointment, they would only agree to take about half of the consignment we had aboard, nor were they prepared to dump it ashore and come back for the other half that night. However, theirs was the task of getting it ashore and inland, so we had to fall in with their decision, although it meant pushing out to sea again and coming in the next night to get rid of what we had, before visiting the depot ship for another load.

The whole job was over in about twenty minutes and the contact boats cast off and drifted a little distance from us, to save wear and tear on their sides. Despite a lavish supply of fenders they had been bumping quite hard against our hull. Thus we all waited for Boris to conclude his business with the haggle man. At last they reappeared on deck and one of the contact boats pulled alongside again, close enough for their man to drop aboard. They chugged nonchalantly off towards the land, their boats deep in the water with the weight of the cases they carried.

We gave them a few minutes and then our own engines sprang to life and we were turning towards the horizon and out to sea again. At a steady ten knots we cruised back to our lying-off base, navigation lights ablaze as soon as we were more than three miles off shore, and other lights as well. As we came to rest and the uproar from the engine room ceased, Marie came marching smartly out of the wheelhouse door and collected us all, except for the watch, for coffee and snacks before we packed up for the night.

Jacques now arranged the watches so that we could all get our fair share of rest and, at the same time, the ship was not without a guardian. By now it was five in the morning and beginning to get light. Still rather keyed up with our nocturnal activities, I felt that I would not be able to sleep, even if I did go to my bunk, so I offered to do the first watch, until 3 a.m. Jacques eyed me somewhat sourly, but accepted the offer, and I went straight up on deck to relieve Boris, who was champing to get below and confer with Jacques.

I was glad that I had this watch. There was so much to see and feel and think over. With the rest of the crew below and asleep, I once again felt that the ship was mine and that I had her to myself, out here in the endless expanse of undulating water, blood-red with the sunrise in the east and purplish-blue to the north, south and west, reflecting the slowly lightening sky.

I paced up and down the silent decks for a while, savouring my solitude and yet feeling, unmistakably, the companionship of the *Nicotina*.

So the ship and I passed our watch together and the unwearied marching of the seas bound us together in a common bondage of adjustment to their motion, and the water held us and soothed us with its soporific sway.

At 8 o'clock I went to Pierre's and Marie's cabin and banged on

the door. Balik snarled his warning but Marie restrained him and shook Pierre, who was to take over the watch from me.

The descent of darkness saw us on our way again and we reached the rendezvous without mishap. This time we were off a fairly large seaside town and Jacques took the *Nicotina* so close in that we could see people strolling along the front.

Balik, who was normally locked up in Marie's cabin during operations, had somehow managed to get out and up on deck. I just had time to see his small, jaunty form trotting towards the bridge when a dog on the shore began barking. In a flash Balik was at the edge of the deck and replying with all the defiance and fury that he could muster. For such a little dog he had a powerful pair of lungs and a singularly penetrating voice. His shouts of rage echoed across the water, evoking a whispered roar of wrath from Jacques on the bridge. Marie came running up and fell on the unsuspecting Balik from behind, sweeping him up in her arms and muffling his mouth with her hand. Pierre, who had heard the commotion from his post in the engine room, stuck his head through the open hatch and blasphemed Marie sibilantly as she hurried past with the stifled Balik. Speedily she scuttled below with him and deposited him in their cabin, in disgrace, this time shutting the door firmly.

The dog on shore who had started all the rumpus was still protesting vigorously at the apparent invasion from the sea by one of his fellows. We could see him quite clearly, standing four square on the promenade, facing out to sea in our direction, for all the world like a gun dog flushing a covey of partridges. Had he been in the pay of the customs we would have been well and truly pointed.

Jacques, still muttering under his breath at Balik, half in affection and half in anger, decided to move a little further off shore. The bright lighting along the sea front was showing up our white-painted hull to an embarrassing degree. He feared that, lying there without lights, some curious promenader might conclude we were adrift and, public-spiritedly, cause some kind of official assistance to be sent out to us.

Shortly afterwards the contact boats hove within signalling distance and the remaining cases were off-loaded from the *Nicotina*.

Back again at our lying-off base, I closed down the engines and retired to my bunk, dropping off to sleep almost as soon as I was in a horizontal position, but a short while later I was woken by what

sounded like a small explosion, right outside my cabin portholes. As I sat up the noise happened again, and again.

Thoroughly aroused, I went up on deck to find that we were lying slap in a middle of a school of whales. The creatures were all round us and seemed to think that the *Nicotina* was another of their kind, for they were snuggled close up to her and behaving in an extremely affectionate fashion.

Their continual blowing was something of a nuisance, for it kept us awake, and on several occasions either I or Pierre had to traipse into the engine room and start the engines to drive them away.

Curiously, the whales would not come near us in the daytime, even if we were lying with engines stopped. Only at night would they crowd round the ship and rend the peace and quiet with their illbred exhalations.

Next morning we started off to look for the depot ship and collect some more cargo. Knowing nothing of navigation, it amazed me how we found her, but in a matter of three hours we had done so. As it happened, I saw her first. Jacques was at the wheel, Jean and I were on deck, and we were all keeping a sharp look-out in the direction where she was supposed to be. I was still too chary of Jacques to say that I thought I could see her, so I tapped Jean on the shoulder and he relayed the information to Jacques, who peered through his glasses and confirmed that it was indeed the depot ship. He looked down at me from the bridge and remarked, rather acidly, that I had good eyesight and could I do as well at night? I said that I thought so, and that was the first crack in the ice.

The ship was wallowing gently as we approached her but, when we were within about half a mile of her, she suddenly began to churn the water astern and move away from us. Never having set eyes on the *Nicotina* before, her skipper had apparently decided that he wasn't having any chit-chat with a stranger. We could, of course, outstrip her in speed, but it was some little while before we drew abreast of her, by which time both ships were spanking along at a fair ten knots or so.

It was not until we were close enough alongside her for the skipper to recognise the individual members of the *Nicotina's* crew that she stopped trying to run away from us. He peered hard at us for a moment and then, as realisation dawned, he seized his cap from his

head and flung it on the deck at his feet in mock exasperation. Then he laid hold of his engine-room telegraph and rang for stop.

Immediately she lost way, and soon we were alongside her and Jacques was pulling her skipper's leg unmercifully. They had viewed our coming from afar and, not knowing this strange ship, thought we were a bunch of hi-jackers coming to relieve them of their cargo.

The *Slapstick*, as she was named, was a big, grey ex-mo-or-minesweeper, powered by a thumping National diesel. Her skipper, Tommy, was an ex-Merchant Navy man, about thirty years of age, cheerful, even-tempered and addicted to fishing for sharks, which he caught fairly frequently. They were not of the man-eating variety, so I was assured, but the strange thing was that there were nearly always several of them escorting the depot ship. Whether they lived in hopes that Tommy might one day fall overboard and they might avenge their brothers, or whether the *Slapstick* was a particularly fruitful source of scraps of food and general galley garbage was never clear, but it was seldom that we were alongside without seeing a few of them mooching about below her.

Her crew of ten or twelve swarthy, tough-looking Spaniards lined her deck and stared at us long and hard. Tommy hopped smartly aboard the *Nicotina* and joined Mike and Jacques for an introduction and a tot or two in Mike's cabin. When he returned to his own ship, the *Slapstick*'s crew began to pitch cases of cigarettes over on to our decks and the *Nicotina* resounded with the thuds and thumps as they landed. An occasional splash would herald the arrival of a case in the drink, and the work would stop whilst the two skippers manœuvred their ships so that it could be picked up by one of the many boathooks being wielded from both decks.

As soon as the cargo was aboard we pulled away, waved cheerio to Tommy and set our course again for the Gulf of Genoa. The *Slapstick*, now empty, turned for home.

In another few hours we were back at our lying-off base and had stopped engines to await darkness.

Towards evening, as we had our meal before setting out for the night's rendezvous, a suspicion of a breeze began to ruffle the sea around us. Jacques consulted the barometer in the wheelhouse and announced that he thought a bit of a blow was on the way.

He was regrettably right. By the time we started engines there was an appreciable wind and the sea was beginning to heave with

the preliminary bunching of its muscles which preluded violent action.

During our two-hour journey towards the coast it became very clear that the halcyon days of lying about with engines stopped had passed, at least for the time being. On arrival at the rendezvous we could see no sign at all of the contact boats. We waited and waited, all of us at the ready on deck scanning the shoreline and the horizon continuously, with the exception of Pierre in the engine room.

Jacques paced impatiently from side to side of the bridge, peering frequently through his night binoculars and muttering softly under his breath from time to time.

Jean and I, standing on deck to starboard of the bridge, talked quietly. Jean told me that this was a bad spot to have to hang about because there was a customs boat based fairly close by, and even if she was not actually looking for us, the chances of her stumbling upon us when returning to her home port were pretty good.

We had stopped one engine only, and were still running the other at idling speed, just to keep the ship under control, for by now a fair-sized swell was sweeping into the bay and rocking us around a good deal. All through the night we waited and watched, but no contact boats put in an appearance, nor was there any signal of any sort. An hour before sunrise Jacques decided to give up for the night and we turned out to sea again.

Outside the bay the sea was fairly high and we automatically fell back into regular cruising duties. This meant keeping on the move all the time, running first in one direction for a couple of hours and then turning back for another two, always returning, eventually, to our lying-off base. This was so that, if necessary, a messenger boat from the shore could find us. But all that day we saw no other vessel and only the *Nicotina* occupied the broad expanse of storm-battered sea.

The bad weather had made me rather ill again and Pierre, when he saw how I was, tried to banish me to my cabin. But he did not yet know me very well, I knew that if I retired to my bunk every time I felt sick I would never get over it. At first, viewing my frequent visits to the rail, Jacques eyed me with a sort of fat-lot-of-use women-are-at-sea look. This hardened my determination to keep going at all costs and I threatened Pierre that he must not, on any account, fail to wake me for my watch at the appointed time.

Mike, on the other hand, was much worse off than I was. He was seasick, but this was coupled with stomach trouble which, I believe, had always been latent, but which had been touched off by the seasickness. He could not bear to go to his cabin, even, but insisted on remaining in the open air at any price. The idea of any form of roof over him horrified him.

For four consecutive nights we returned to the rendezvous, only to wait in vain. On the fifth night the storm had virtually blown itself out, although there was still a big swell running and the *Nicotina* rolled and plunged about wildly.

Mike, by now, was exceedingly weak but, as the weather had improved slightly, he felt able to return to his cabin. It was the beginning of the end for him. Though she was his ship, he was never again able to go out with the *Nicotina* on her working trips. Undoubtedly, whatever his complaint was, it had been aggravated by the very violent seasickness he had suffered.

On our fifth return to the rendezvous the contact boats finally showed up. We were all heartily sick of pulling the cargo out of the hold every evening and stashing it back again during the night as we returned from a fruitless visit to the coast. We had some 250 cases still to deliver and it was impossible to leave them on deck during the day, to be soaked with rain and sea water.

Owing to my sickness, I had been virtually useless in the cargo-shifting work so, to release another man for the job, I had taken the wheel during the spells of getting the cases up and stowing them back again. Jacques would tell me the course to steer and I would fight with the wheel in my feeble endeavours to keep the *Nicotina* even remotely on the course he had indicated.

It was hardly surprising that the eventual appearance of the contact boats should engender some rather vitriolic comments. Even Jacques, well versed in the dislike which our Italian receivers had for any form of seagoing which did not consist of a flat calm, was irritable with them and spoke his mind. It got him nowhere, except to relieve his feelings. They simply asserted that it would have been impossible to trans-ship the cases, even in the comparative shelter of the bay, and had remained cosily at home while we sweated it out in the open sea. They added, not without a touch of glee, that the local customs boat had been out every night and all of her crew had been extremely ill and thoroughly unenthusiastic about the

whole thing, which probably explained why we had not been spotted and chased.

Then they announced that they could not take the whole of our remaining cargo that night, as there were not enough lorries to cope with it on shore. This meant another twenty-four hours of hanging about, and yet another rendezvous, this time on the other side of the Gulf. Nobody was pleased. But it had to be done.

Fortunately, the sea had calmed a good deal and life was reasonably comfortable on board, provided we kept moving. The swell was still too great to permit us to stop our engines. We tried once, but the *Nicotina* immediately went into an orgy of rolling and we had to get under way again.

The last night's work was somewhat more eventful than usual. The contact boats were two hours late in keeping the rendezvous and, when they finally did show up, after we had stopped and started at least four times on false alarms, there was a more than usually tense air about their occupants. The remainder of the cases were trans shipped and their haggle man held his customary payment session with Boris below decks. As they were leaving us, he asked Jacques not to start the *Nicotina*'s engines for twenty minutes, in order to give them a chance to reach the shore as quietly as possible, and to this Jacques agreed. Tensely we watched the small fishing boats moving towards the shore until they merged into the darkness and we could only hear the faint chugging of their engines. There were three of them, on this occasion, and they all went in different directions. The minutes crawled past as we waited, silent and immobile, the only sound being the swish of water as the *Nicotina* rolled quietly and whispered to herself. The sky was inky black and the reflections of the lights on shore seemed to reach out a long way towards us across the dark water.

So suddenly that it nearly startled the life out of me a red rocket flared on the shore slightly astern of us. It was a signal that one of the boats had been intercepted and for us to get out, fast. As it shot into the sky, Jacques hollered for the engines to be started and for full, emergency revolutions. Pierre, in the engine room, leapt for the starter buttons, the engines bellowed and Jacques threw his full weight on to the two gear levers, banging them into "Ahead" and then seized the throttles and moved them, steadily but inexorably, up to their maximum limit.

The *Nicotina* shivered as her propellers snatched at the water and drove us feverishly through it, and the noise from the engine room increased in volume till it sounded like all hell let loose. The blowers shrieked their protests at being forced to work so hard and, most alarming of all, a tremendous shower of sparks shot out of the funnel and bits of burning carbon settled all over the decks. As we cleared a headland, we hit the swell squarely and the *Nicotina* fairly crashed along over it. Not until we were six or seven miles off the coast did Jacques ease the throttles down to normal cruising revs.

In the meantime, I had been busy discouraging the tarpaulin over the engine-room coach roof from catching fire. Some quite large pieces of red-hot carbon had cannonaded out of the funnel and landed on it, and one or two small conflagrations had been starting, when I caught them and beat the life out of them with a paddle from the canoe. Had there been a customs boat giving chase we would have been easy to see by the trail of vivid, red sparks which issued from the funnel but, fortunately for us, the trouble appeared to be confined to the land.

Empty now, we turned for home, our job done. All through the remainder of the night we steered for Villefranche and, as dawn broke, we were not far from port. I had finished my watch an hour before we entered the harbour but I stayed on deck to taste the wonderful feeling of having got away with it.

The *Nicotina* steamed proudly round Cap Ferrat and down the long bay, the water creaming out from her flaring bows. She was well aware that she had done a good job.

Slowly Jacques eased her into the harbour and we moored. A surprise was in store for us. There, just ahead of us, lay the *Pinch of Salt*. This was our first meeting with her since we had left Tangier for Greece and it led to a double celebration, the successful completion of our job and the reunion of the two ships.

NICOTINA'S Heyday

DURING THE ensuing nine days we spent most of the time celebrating, recovering from celebrating and preparing the *Nicotina* for her next run. We remained in harbour all through the bright nights of the full moon, for it was the golden rule that no ship should work in moonlight, unless it was completely and absolutely unavoidable. The reason for this was too obvious to require explanation. Doubtless the Italian customs were fully aware of this and took advantage of the lull in operations to prepare themselves, also, for the next month's work. I once heard that they were only granted leave during the full moon period.

The time was marred only by one thing. I had some monumental rows with Mike about the forthcoming trip. He, of course, was not going to be on board. His intense suffering, and slow recovery once we were back in harbour, had made it quite obvious that it would be madness for him to submit himself again to such an ordeal. On the other hand, I would not listen to any suggestion of the ship sailing without me.

Mike advanced many arguments, most of them excellent ones; it was too dangerous, I might land in an Italian gaol, I might be drowned, I might be shot, and so on, *ad infinitum*. But I would not budge in my decision.

Mike was not a sentimental man, nor had he ever had the remotest inkling of my feelings about the *Nicotina*; I had kept them to myself. To him she was just something he had bought as a means of earning a living abroad, but for me it was very different. I had come to realise that this life was exactly right for me and suited me in every way, with the exception of the seasickness, and I was sure I would get over that, in time. By now I was wedded heart and soul to the ship and it was inconceivable that she should put to sea without me aboard.

Despite arguments, threatenings and reasonings, I remained ada-

mant and more obstinate than I had ever been in my life. In the end, Mike gave up, unwillingly and angrily, and the fight did not make for very good relations between us.

Soon we were ready for sea again and the crew came aboard the day before we were due to sail, and set about checking their various departments. Marie had ordered vast quantities of food. Pierre arranged our refuelling and stocking up with engine oil. Jacques, Jean and Boris saw to all the hundred and one details which needed attention before the trip, including moving the ship to just outside the drydock to take on fresh water.

The *Pinch of Salt* had already departed for her own hunting grounds. Although she worked for a different organisation, her lying-off base was the same as ours. In fact, most of the ships in the Nicotine Navy at that time used the same place and there were occasions when the sea was almost crowded.

We left Villefranche on a perfect summer's morning and headed out to sea for our rendezvous with the *Slapstick* and the first consignment of cargo. Then, heavily laden, we swung round and began our journey to the Gulf of Genoa. Crossing the lying-off base, we carried straight on without stopping, for we were to rendezvous that very night and had only just sufficient time to reach the appointed place.

Darkness came down whilst we were still on our way and, a couple of hours later, we were in the required position and rocking gently at our ease, engines stopped and everyone on the look out. We had not long to wait this time. Soon we could hear the contact boat approaching us from the shore.

We had just begun to unload the cases into her when there was a tremendous bang on the shore and, showering sparks, a green rocket swept into the sky. This was a signal that the local customs boat was lurking about.

Fortunately, only a few cases had passed between the two vessels and the contact boat's crew very quickly sent them hurtling back on to our decks. Immediately they were cleared of incriminating evidence they cast off and trundled away from us, intent on returning to their innocent occupation of fishing as rapidly as possible.

For long drawn-out moments Jacques remained statuesque on the bridge. I wondered when he was going to give the order to start the engines. Afterwards, I realised that he was listening to see from what direction the customs boat was approaching. Soon we heard her and

at once our engines were started and we set course out to sea with all speed.

A searchlight thrust through the darkness, moving backwards and forwards across the bay, as our hunters sought for us. Inevitably it lighted upon us, showing up our white hull with shocking brilliance, and the race was on.

We were lucky that she was not the fastest boat they had. This one was obviously not up to our flat-out speed, and although she stayed doggedly behind us for quite a time, we outran her and also crossed the three-mile limit when she dropped back and eventually disappeared.

During our dash to safety, the full revs demanded from the engines had again resulted in showers of sparks from the funnel. Jacques remarked that possibly this had encouraged the customs boat to follow us for longer than usual, perhaps thinking that we had engine trouble and might break down at any moment. It was a fault which had to be overcome and, the next day, we solved the problem by cutting one of our 40-gallon fuel drums completely in two and rigging one half over the funnel. The exhausts could still function but the sparks would be deflected down on to the decks, instead of trailing out behind us in a steady stream and advertising our whereabouts to all and sundry. It looked decidedly queer but it was immensely effective.

One of the difficulties we had to contend with was the fact that the flag ship of the Italian customs fleet, at that time, was a Fairmile "B" class, just like ourselves. She was still equipped with her original engines, Hall Scott, high octane petrol jobs, giving her 1,300 h.p. to play with. This, compared with our maximum of 450 h.p. was, on paper, a sobering consideration. Yet, strangely enough, nobody appeared to worry about it very much.

We all seemed to be able to show our heels to the Italian though nobody went out of their way to flush her out. The catch was, being the same size and shape as one of us, it was impossible to tell, in the darkness, whether a Fairmile seen some distance away was friend or foe. Several rather awkward incidents had arisen from this state of affairs, notably one night when the *Pinch of Salt* saw what she thought was us working nearby, until it transpired that it was the customs Fairmile. If she had not been so hasty as to start firing whilst still some way off she might well have got alongside the *Pinch of Salt* before her crew realised that anything was wrong.

Eventually the various skippers agreed on a recognition signal to be exchanged if they happened upon one another in the dark, and the signal was supposed to be top secret. Nobody knew how, but it leaked out to the Italians, unbeknown to us.

The ship to catch the full blast of this unfortunate contretemps was the *Black Cracker*, the only one of us who still retained her Hall Scott engines and had not converted to diesels. In the circumstances, the Italians could not have hit upon a more worthy antagonist. Out of the five of us operating in the Gulf on that particular night they had to choose the *Black Cracker*.

Even so, it was touch and go. The customs boat had approached quite slowly, with no lights showing, and had given the recognition signal clearly. Luckily the *Black Cracker* had turned towards her and was under way, actually moving to meet her, when a suspicion that something was not quite right seeped into the minds of her crew. Close now to the customs boat, they realised her identity with considerable shock, mingled with curiosity at having received the "top secret" signal from her.

From what I heard of it, there was no time to do anything much except go full speed ahead and try to dodge. The two ships raced towards each other, the Italians sure that they had a kill and the *Black Cracker* determined that, if all else failed, they would ram her. Their skipper was a particularly hard nut and he held his course straight for the Italian, his crew crouched behind whatever cover they could find, until it seemed impossible that the ships could avoid each other.

At the very last instant the Italian's nerve cracked and he swung his wheel hard over. Still he was not quite quick enough and his stern smashed into the port bow of the *Black Cracker*, ripping her stanchions out by the roots, tearing off large chunks of rubbing strake and rending her decks. This must have shaken him up well and truly, for he was slow in turning and, before he was fully round, the *Black Cracker* was already flying for the open sea and the international limit.

After that, of course, the game was up. That very morning, at sunrise, the *Black Cracker* toured the rest of us, rocking gently in the slight swell out at the lying-off base, imparting the news of what had happened, exhibiting her scars and warning us that the recognition signal was henceforth useless. In passing, her skipper made some ribald comments about our anti-spark device, remarking that it was fortunate that he had seen it in daylight, otherwise he would not

have known the *Nicotina* at night, and would have rammed us without a qualm.

To the best of my knowledge no one ever elucidated how the secret had leaked out, with such near-disastrous results. It seemed strange, too, that a five to one chance had led the Italians to tangle with the *Black Cracker*, the only one really a match for them in speed, and so sprung the trap.

Our next night's work was somewhat more satisfactory and we unshipped some 250 cases without being disturbed. The contact boat had escaped the attentions of the customs the night before, and was again alongside us loading up to the limit.

So the work went on, and we lived the seagoing smuggler's life, night by night. Sometimes the weather was good, sometimes it was bad, and often it was just half-way between the two. I have many pictures in my mind of the life I led at that time.

There were the afternoon tea parties, patronised only by the English in the fleet. If it happened to be calm enough to take the canoe afloat, I would persuade Jean or Boris to lower it into the water for me, and paddle off toward the *Pinch of Salt*, where Jaspar and Richard would have a good, scalding cup of real tea ready for me.

Sometimes Tommy of the *Slapstick* would join us too, but although I tried to persuade my own French crew to partake, they were not very enthusiastic about the cup that cheers, chiefly, I suspected, because it did not incitiate. I believe they considered us slightly mad to foregather and drink this tea stuff when we could be sleeping. Those occasions must have been amongst the strangest circumstances in which tea has ever been taken; a scattering of English, surrounded by French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italians, drinking their afternoon tea aboard a small ship, twenty miles out to sea, laden with thousands of contraband cigarettes.

It is hardly necessary to state that we were never short of cigarettes. One of our crew was an expert at "milking" the cases or, as he called it, "doing a Cæsarean." He could open a case, remove a carton of cigarettes from the middle of it, and seal it up again so that it was impossible to tell that it had been touched. Once I asked him what our customers on shore thought about such a practise, but he said that they were resigned to it, and had been for years. Besides, he pointed out righteously, they often tried to palm him off with forged dollars. and sometimes succeeded.

During the months spent with this crew my command of French did not improve. I had the traditional English laziness about other people's languages, and, anyway, Jacques spoke English very well and Jean reasonably well, so I was never stuck. I did pick up quite a number of engineering terms, due to working with Pierre in the engine room, and learned effective cusses from them all, but I had to make a real effort if I wanted to talk to Marie, as she knew no English at all. Balik, I believe, was bi-lingual. He was an incredibly clever little dog.

When the sea was reasonably calm and I could take the risk of setting foot inside the galley, I would sometimes sit and chat with Marie as she went about her work. This was the only time I really tried to speak French and some of my attempts were undoubtedly entertaining for her. But this only served to cement our friendship and I reflected how strange it was that one could develop respect and affection for somebody, when the pair of you could barely make yourselves understood.

Our operations during the months were never devoid of excitement. Always there was the danger of the customs, but, far more worthy of consideration, was the sea.

On one trip we did the weather was so appalling that for seven nights running we were unable to land a single case. We were all very much on edge through frustration and exhaustion. On the eighth night one contact boat was shamed into coming out, though the sea was still very rough, and she did not attempt to take off any cargo. André himself came aboard the *Nicotina*, not without some risk, and went into a huddle with Jacques and Boris on the bridge. There was a lot of discussion between them and finally André made a spectacular leap back into his contact boat and they left us, disappearing into the wild, black night.

Our instructions were that in two nights' time we were to enter Genoa harbour *itself*, to unload the whole of the cargo in one swoop, straight into lorries which would be waiting there.

If I had been invited to place my head in a convenient lion's mouth I could not have been more taken aback. It seemed the height of "asking for it."

Jacques, who had mellowed slightly towards me by now and was no longer actively opposed to my presence in the ship, explained that the customs men were to be paid handsomely for their pre-

arranged blindness on this particular occasion. I had no idea that such an arrangement could be made, and undeniably it was a very expensive one. However, André got his money's worth.

At the appointed time, after forty-eight hours of slightly improving but still uncomfortably stormy weather, we made our way towards Genoa.

The night was very dark indeed, and even when we were close to the land the ship twisted and corkscrewed about and was difficult to handle.

Quite soon we were rounding a mole and proceeding into a deserted part of the harbour. As quickly and quietly as possible we tied up alongside the wharf and my main impression was relief at the sudden cessation of movement. I could see practically nothing at all in the all-pervading blackness.

Within minutes of our arrival the cargo hatch was off and we were already forming a chain to pass the cases ashore as fast as Jean and Boris could heave them up from the hold. The rumble of several large lorries made itself heard and soon they were lined up on the quayside.

The whole job was beautifully carried out. Jean and Boris were hurling cases up on deck as hard as they could go; Jacques, Pierre and I had formed a chain with myself last, right at the edge of the port deck. From my hands the cases passed to a man standing on the quay and thence along a string of lorry drivers and helpers into the waiting lorries. Four hundred and twenty-five cases passed that way that night.

As my eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness I noted, almost subconsciously, that the man taking the cases from me was wearing some kind of uniform. I tried to peer more closely at it but failed to make out any details. I could only catch vague glimpses of shiny buttons and the general impression of a uniform style of cut about his clothes. Then the staggering thought exploded in my head: this is a customs man!

It was. And there were more of them, guarding the dock where we were operating, keeping a look-out from the mole we had passed on our way in, and even watching their own boat, lest someone should take it into his head to drop a clanger. It was a case of not letting the day shift know what the night shift doeth.

Soon the job was done. The engines of the lorries sprang into

life only fractions of a second before our own two diesels let rip. Speed was the essence of success and we had certainly done a quick job. Now we had to get out of the harbour, and fast, before anyone not "in" on the arrangements got curious about the noises emanating from the dock.

Skilfully Jacques swung the ship round and we fairly belted out past the mole to meet, once again, and submit to the furious sea.

After the calm of the harbour it seemed rougher than ever, as if the waters were angry with us for having managed to unship our cargo without being inconvenienced by them. Perhaps it had become rougher, in actual fact, but regardless of the *Nicotina*'s violent behaviour, Jacques turned her in the direction of the depot ship and we spent the remainder of the night fighting our way towards her. There was no sleep for any of us. Even those who were free to go to their bunks found it hard work to stay in them.

I stood by the hatch, having just emerged from the engine room after a routine check around, and watched the sulky morning procrastinating its way into the sky and revealing the huge, grey seas all about us. The decks were constantly awash and the *Nicotina* rolled viciously. Quite suddenly the realisation hit me—I wasn't feeling ill! I could hardly believe it. I peered at the sea to convince myself that it really was rough, and watched the arc of the mast thrashing across the sky. It was very rough. I was so pleased with myself at this momentous discovery that I rushed up on to the bridge to share my excitement with the nearest person to hand. Then I realised that it was Jacques who was at the wheel, and stopped dead. He turned to ask me what was the matter. I had to tell him; I was bursting to tell somebody, though I did not expect that Jacques, of all people, to be exactly bowled over by the glad tidings.

Jacques looked me up and down with the stern, disapproving expression on his face to which I had become so accustomed. Then he pivoted on his heel and looked at the state of the sea. I felt completely idiotic and was sure that he was about to make some sarcastic remark.

To my utter surprise, he turned back to me and smiled. For a moment I was too astonished to say anything and too intrigued by observing how the effects of a smile converted him from an aggressive, resentful character into someone remarkably human. Then,

without a word, he clapped me on the shoulder and turned back to the wheel. The ice was finally broken.

There was one rendezvous which I always enjoyed going to, for the delightful reason that we always went very close inshore and there was a dance hall nearby, from which, on calm nights, dance music reached us clearly across the water. Jean made an excellent partner and the pair of us would weave in and out of the ready-stacked cases, up and down the ship, passing the time whilst waiting for the contact boats. Jacques and Boris, look-outing-it from the bridge, would grin at us benevolently as we danced past them. The tango was our favourite and I found that rope-soled espadrilles on teak decks are really very satisfactory for dancing. Even Pierre would stick his head and shoulders out of the hatch to watch us and chuckle quietly at the incongruity of the situation, while Marie would tease him, softly, because he could not desert his post in the engine room to partner her.

Another night we were approaching a rendezvous off a very remote part of the coast. There were few lights to be seen on the shore and none on the water at all, not even a *bona fide* fishing vessel. It was supposed to be a fairly safe rendezvous and, although we were vigilant as always, we had no reason to expect trouble that night.

The weather was beautiful, about as perfect as it could ever be. Hardly a ripple showed on the water and not a breath of air stirred. We sailed slowly in to the appointed place and stopped our engines. Calm as it was, the *Nicotina* could still find enough swell to set her rolling. It had been said of these ships that they would roll on damp grass.

For about half an hour we waited, shrouded in darkness, patient but wary. Then we heard the contact boat approaching us and soon she was loading.

I was on the bridge with Jacques, who was searching the scene with his binoculars, when I noticed him stop in his sweep of the coastline and concentrate steadily on something which had caught his attention directly ahead. Almost simultaneously I heard the faint, far-distant sound of engines. It was trouble right enough, though what a customs boat was doing in this spot was a matter for conjecture. By now the contact boat's crew had caught the sound themselves and there was barely any need for Jacques to order them to

cast off. They were heavily laden by this time, and if they were not to be caught red-handed we would have to draw the customs off them.

Pierre, at the ready, started our engines almost before the order was out of Jacques's mouth. As the customs boat's engines were already running, she would not hear us.

Quickly we began to move, and then I noticed that instead of turning straight out to sea, Jacques was running the ship parallel with the coast. When we were about half a mile from our contact boat he ordered the navigation lights to be switched on.

The customs boat, seeing our lights come on so suddenly, out of nowhere, immediately turned towards us and approached at high speed. Waiting until she was firmly set on her course towards us, we then doused our lights, Jacques spun the wheel hard over and, with the diesels yelling fit to burst their cylinder heads, we shot off to seaward.

In the meantime the haggle man had rushed up on deck from where he had been counting the cash with Boris. There had been no time to transfer him back into the contact boat and he had, perforce, to remain with us until the next rendezvous.

He was allotted a spare bunk in the wardroom and Jacques promptly shanghaied him into the watches, so as to keep him amused and also allow extra relaxation to the others.

The whole matter was something of a joke to Luigi, who settled quickly into the routine of our life aboard and enjoyed himself thoroughly. He was a large, dark, powerful man, and the fact that his wife, on shore, would be wondering where he was worried him not one whit. We knew that the contact boat would have had plenty of time to make herself scarce, the customs having chased us for some considerable distance, and his men would pass on news of him to his home.

The ensuing day, with Luigi aboard, was almost like a holiday cruise. The *Nicotina* lay in the placid, green water, engines silent, the sun beating down on her decks. Just before lunch, having slept long and well, I emerged from my cabin and contemplated a swim. Jean and Pierre joined me, and we flopped into the warm water from the permanently-fixed ladder at the stern. They immediately began playing the fool, trying to duck me, and the three of us splashed about like a bunch of kids in the sunshine.

Eventually I swam away from them, diving completely beneath the ship and bumping my head on her apology for a keel as I went. I back-crawled in her shade as far as the bows, then lay in the water and studied her. She was indeed lovely to look at. The flare of the bow sheered above me and the long line of her hull, sweeping away to the stern, looked immense when seen from this angle. I wished I could photograph her from such a vantage point but I did not think it could be done without getting my camera wet.

Back on board, my sea-cool feet felt the heat of the decks all the more as I padded towards the wheelhouse. I collected a towel from my cabin and disposed of my bathing cap. Then, spreading the towel on a convenient pile of cases, I stretched out for a sunbathe. The cases were remarkably comfortable, firm, yet not too hard to lie on, the only slight drawback being that it was as well to take care not to cross swords with the steel bands round them.

Pure contentment was mine. My only wish was that I could go on living this life for ever.

That afternoon, when everybody had lunched and taken a siesta, Jacques proposed a little sport in the form of target practice. We all possessed a firearm of some sort or another, for obvious reasons. Mine was a .38 Smith and Wesson which I had coaxed out of my indulgent, ex-fiancé at the end of the war.

For our target, Jacques threw an empty bottle into the water and the crew began to pot at it. The air resounded with small arms fire, and Balik, not one whit alarmed by the noise, jumped up on a stack of cases and sat there, his head on one side, viewing the proceedings with the air of an umpire. Finally, as nobody had succeeded in hitting the target, which continued to bob tantalisingly in the water, he stood up and made his contribution by barking at it.

Jacques snorted, disgustedly, and turned away from the bottle to see me standing with the Smith and Wesson. He had apparently not realised that I was prepared to join in this contest and, with a mocking shout of warning to the others, he betook himself to cover behind the nearest ventilator. The rest of the crew, playing him up, also made derogatory moves to cover, and I was left with the deck to myself and the target, some distance away by now. Determined not to be discouraged by this ballyhoo, I began to fire at the bottle. And here I had the most incredible stroke of luck.

With my third shot it disappeared. I lay no claim at all to being

a good shot; as a member of a club I had been trained to use both a revolver and a rifle, but I was far from outstanding. When I saw that the bottle had gone I was thunderstruck.

There was a complete hush on deck. Luigi was the first to move out of shelter, his face registering a mixture of amazement, shock and disbelief. With great presence of mind I masked the surprise on my own face; my only dread was that Jacques would cast another bottle into the water and challenge me to do it again. But luck was still with me. At that moment Marie called from the wheelhouse doorway that our evening meal was ready. We trooped below to the saloon and, before seating himself at the table, Jacques swept me a deep bow, his eyes twinkling.

This was how my entirely phoney reputation as a crack shot came into being. Nothing would deter Luigi from telling the tale when he returned on shore, and it spread among our contact boat crews, all down the coast. Whenever they came alongside, thereafter, I used to catch them peering at me curiously, in the darkness. Only I knew that the whole thing was a myth, though I did nothing to discourage it. A reputation of that nature could, in our business, be a very useful insurance policy.

That night's activities were uninterrupted and very successful. Not only the contact boat of the night before came out, but she brought two others with her, and they cleared the ship of cargo entirely. Luigi made his farewells, shaking my hand with a bemused air, and departed with them.

Still in perfect weather we made our return voyage to Villefranche and tied up in the harbour for a well-earned rest and relaxation. Another trip was over, another thousand cases of cigarettes had been smuggled into Italy. Another session of making merry lay ahead.

Hi-jackers, Fire and Breakdowns

THE FIRST symptoms of autumn were making their mark as we prepared for our next job. In the early morning when I padded out on deck there was an unaccustomed nip in the air, and the vegetation wore that indefinable sort of off-green appearance.

During our break in harbour the moon had passed through its full phase and was now well on the wane. We were restive and ready for work again. Even the *Nicotina* tugged suggestively at her moorings.

The crew came aboard shortly after breakfast and set about the many tasks which presaged a trip. The fuel arrived in two enormous tankers, which picked their way with difficulty along the quay, to reach us. The crews of the *Black Cracker* and the *Pinch of Salt* had to slack off their ropes and hold them up high, so that the tankers could drive underneath them. Then the truck with the food supplies arrived and Marie was busy checking the stores as they were loaded aboard.

Pierre was in the engine room and I joined him there to help with engine oil changes and various other odd jobs.

Mike, still tacitly averse to my sailing with the ship, had installed himself in a hotel nearby, but was aboard helping with the preparations.

Having greeted me as though he had not seen me for at least a couple of years, Balik sat in lordly fashion on the quay, snarling at the tanker drivers and all other strangers. He tolerated their presence near the ship because, in his intelligent little brain, he realised that they were a necessity, but this did not lessen his vigilance over their activities.

Just before lunchtime, as the crew were going ashore for their meal, Jacques called to me that he would be back in the afternoon and that we would "make water." I could hardly believe my ears. Whilst his command of the English language was very good, he had a not un-

natural tendency to translate literally, with sometimes tragic results. An entertaining mental picture flitted through my mind as I asked him to repeat his statement, whereupon realisation of his true meaning penetrated my amusement, that we were to take the ship to the drydock and fill our tanks up with water.

Challenged to explain why I was smiling, I sought for a way out of this delicate situation and finally, not finding one, I shelved the problem by saying that I would tell him later. I hoped that he would forget about it.

He did not. That afternoon, as we lay with bows overhanging the drydock and the water flowing through hoses into our tanks, I was forced to explain, as best as I could, the English interpretation of his remark. His head snapped back and he let out a laugh which almost vibrated the hoses supplying our tanks nearby.

The ship now being in a state of readiness, we all went ashore that evening for a meal and a drink. We chose a quite little café near the waterfront and, after we had eaten, we sat outside with our drinks. It was a wonderful evening, peaceful and cool, a faint breeze rustling gently through the trees, a few people strolling the front slowly, and the sea glittering in the glow of starlight. Balik lay at Marie's feet, occasionally lifting his head to sniff, oddly enough, in the direction of Italy. Jacques chuckled and remarked that he must be scenting out the customs for us.

We walked leisurely back to the ship and turned in early, for we were to be up again and away in the small hours of the morning.

It was still dark when we moved out of the harbour a few hours later. Just as we cleared C. p Ferrat, the first struggling streaks of dawn began to awaken the world and, by the time we had found the *Slapstick* and gone alongside to load i p, it was a brilliant, effervescent morning.

The *Slapstick*'s superstructure was festooned, here and there, with the remains of a shark which they had caught a day before. Bits of skin were draped about the ship and Tommy amused me with a highly coloured and grossly exaggerated account of the creature's capture.

I stood on his bridge with him, the inevitable drink to hand, and looked down on the busy scene. The *Nicotina* lay placidly in the turquoise water, contentment that she was back at work again reeking out of her. Tommy's crew were labouring with a will, chucking

the cases over on to her decks like so many, feather-filled pillows, and I noticed that something of a bottle-neck was building up. Cases were coming over too quickly for our crew to clear them out of the way and as fast as each member jumped forward to retrieve a case from the "landing area," two or three more would come soaring over.

I thanked Tommy for his hospitality and climbed back aboard to lend a hand. Dodging the flying cases, I made my way down into the hold, where Jacques and Boris were stacking up the cargo as fast as they could go. They built a small pile for me to stand on, so that my head and shoulders just reached above the level of the deck, and I could seize the cases as Jean and Pierre moved them towards me, and pass them down.

It was very warm in the hold. Jacques and Boris were both clad only in shorts, but they were bathed in sweat. I remember noticing that Jacques's normally fair hair was quite dark where it had flopped on to his perspiring forehead and then I heard a thud behind me and something hit me a tremendous crack on the shoulder and side of the head, and I couldn't quite hang on to my consciousness. A case which had been flung across from the *Slapstick* with more than usual zest, by one of her powerful crew, had landed on one of its corners and bounced over the edge of the hold where I had to be right in its path. It hit the floor of the hold with a resounding thump, causing Jacques to turn round quickly, just in time to catch me as my knees buckled.

Having a pretty hard skull, I came round in a very short space of time, to find myself laid out on the deck and streaming with water which Jean had kindly administered. Work had ceased altogether and people were bunched around the corpse. Jacques grasped me by the shoulders and lifted me into a sitting position, from which I endeavoured to reorientate myself. Having assured himself that I was fully conscious again, Jacques turned and rent Tommy, who, in his turn, raised hell with the poor guy who had dealt me this somewhat unexpected knockout.

Then I crawled to my feet and Marie escorted me to my cabin, where I removed my saturated shirt and shorts and found dry ones. My head bumped and clattered, and I winced at the renewed thunder of cases arriving on the deck right above me. There was a huge bruise coming up on my shoulder, and a respectable lump on the side of my head, but nothing seemed to be broken.

I was not sorry to lie back on my bunk for a while, as I felt rather dizzy and slightly sick, although this passed when Marie brewed me a cup of good, strong coffee. Just as I was dropping off to sleep, there was a knock on my cabin door. Marie, who had administered aspirins and was applying a cold compress to my shoulder, answered it to find a worried-looking Tommy outside. I called him in and Marie brought him a cup of coffee too.

We were fully loaded now, but he had wanted to see for himself that I was really all right, before we left. He even tried to persuade me to remain on board the *Slapstick*, and not go with the *Nicotina* until she came back for her next load, but I wasn't having any. It would have needed three tons of plaster and a strait jacket to get me off the ship. While I reassured him. Jacques joined the party, receiving a cup of coffee from Marie, and sat down on the end of my bunk to eye me sternly.

For a horrible mornent I feared he was going to make me stay with the *Slapstick*. If he had made an order of it I would have had to obey it. It was one thing to defy and overcome the man's totally obstinate and unreasonable objections about women in his crew, but it was another matter entirely to question his authority as skipper, once having been accepted.

To my great relief he merely asked how I felt and whether I wanted to stay aboard or remain with the *Slapstick*. I replied that I would be perfectly all right in three or four hours and that I most certainly did not want to be left behind. Jacques grinned and shook my foot, and the subject was closed.

I lay abed while the *Nicotina* set sail to the lying-off base. Having taken aspirins to cope with my aching head, I dropped off to sleep and did not wake for some hours. When I finally did surface it was evening, and I could hear Marie preparing supper in the galley.

I lay drowsily for a while and sorted myself out. My headache had gone but the lump was still there and extremely tender to the touch. My shoulder was very stiff and painful and, when I removed the compress, the bruise was of positively heroic proportions.

I rolled gingerly off my bunk and wandered out into the saloon, just as everybody except the man at the wheel was toegathering for the meal. Then it occurred to me that we were still going. Surely by now we should have reached base. I couldn't understand it. When

Jacques appeared I asked him what was going on, and the truth came out.

We were going to entirely new hunting grounds for this trip, right down the Italian coast to Naples, in fact. I was surprised and curious as to why there had been a change of plan and Jacques explained that, as things had been a bit hot in the Gulf of Genoa of late, André and Louis had decided to try our luck further south. It was news to all of us except Jacques, not even Tommy or any of the *Slapstick*'s crew had the slightest idea that we were going to work a new area.

Some thirty-six hours later we had arrived at our new lying-off position, between fifteen and twenty odd miles off Naples. Still the weather was excellent, hardly a breath of wind stirred the surface of the water and the *Nicotina* barely rocked as she lay in the embracing ocean, her engines stilled.

That night we made for our first rendezvous but, although we hung about until close on dawn, we saw nothing and nobody. Puzzled, we returned to base and tried again the following night. Still we were unsuccessful, and the third night was no better.

By now, Jacques and Boris were extremely concerned and we were all beginning to feel frustrated and irritable. We could not see the sense of sending us all the way down here, to be messed about like this, wasting fuel and energy, when nobody came near us and our cargo remained in the hold. We were restless for some action. Little did we know that it was to come, sooner than we had bargained for.

For the fourth evening in succession we prepared to set out for the rendezvous. I climbed through the engine-room hatch and started the engines. The revs dropped slightly as the *Nicotina* turned out of the trough of swell in which she had been lolling, then, as she straightened up on her course, they settled down in their customary harmony.

I sat down at the foot of the companion ladder, with all the dials well in view and controls within reach.

About an hour and a half later, my thoughts were rudely interrupted by a grinding noise coming from the port gearbox and, almost at the same moment, a cloud of thick, black smoke poured out of it. I shot to my feet, knocked the throttle down and flung my weight on the gear control to slam the engine into neutral. Even as I did this, two trains of thought were fizzling and conflicting in my head, one that I was not supposed to alter the set of the engines without

reference to the skipper, and the other that unless some drastic and speedy action was taken, a great deal more damage than had already occurred was going to be done. To compensate for the loss of power, I raised the revs on the starboard engine to 1,750 and then made all speed up to the bridge to report to Jacques on what had happened. He took it very calmly, considering the fact that one engine was completely out of action.

I was just raising my hand to batter on Pierre's cabin door when it swung open and he emerged, half dressed. There was no need to tell him that something was wrong.

We made our way through the wardroom, where the rest of the crew were playing cards. Jean raised an eyebrow at us as we passed and followed us into the engine room. The starboard engine was throbbing away valiantly, but our speed had dropped considerably, even though I had raised the revs.

Pierre looked round the engine room, which was still very full of smoke, and then bent, when I pointed to the port gearbox, and placed his hand on it. He withdrew it much more quickly. The casing was extremely hot. Led by Pierre, the three of us trooped up to the bridge again and Pierre reported to Jacques. The substance of his news was that we could do nothing about the breakdown whilst we were still under way.

Jacques swore, in French, and glowered out over the sea. He was obviously trying to make up his mind what to do. We were nearing the rendezvous and were already inside territorial waters. For several minutes nobody spoke, during which time Boris also arrived on the bridge and, as it was getting crowded up there, I stepped down on to the deck to await some decision.

At length it was decided that we would go on, now that we were so near. On this part of the coast there were, at that time, no customs boats that could do more than seven knots or so. Jacques had checked, before we left harbour, that the only fast one anywhere in this area was the Naples boat herself, and she was laid up in port with engine trouble. He smiled wickedly as he imparted this information. We weren't the only ones.

Now that Pierre was up and about, he took over in the engine room and I went below to my cabin. It was getting cooler and I pulled slacks and sweater on over my shirt and shorts.

I returned to the bridge to add my eyes to Jacques's in the business

of keeping a look-out. For some intuitive reason I felt more and more uneasy as we neared the land. I knew there was no real danger from customs boats and yet I felt very strongly that the loss of one engine was not the worst of our troubles.

Soon we were entering the small bay where we had already spent three fruitless nights of waiting. It was a bottle-shaped place and my apprehension grew stronger. This was a real death trap of a rendezvous and if anything else went wrong, in here, we really would have had it.

Jacques cruised the *Nicotina* round for a while, in wide circles. The land looked dark and ominous and there were very few lights on the shore, so I assumed that it was a comparatively uninhabited part of the coast. Finally, Jacques ordered the engine to be stopped. I signalled to Pierre, through the open hatch, and a moment later the roar died away.

As always, after the engines had been closed down, the ensuing silence seemed heavy and oppressive. Gradually the ship swung into the trough of the swell. Nobody spoke. All eyes were raking the coastline around us and mine were on the small gap to seaward which was our only way to safety.

The time dragged on and still nothing happened. I sat in a corner of the bridge and longed for a cigarette. There we were, with some two and a half million cigarettes aboard, and not a one could I smoke, at least, not out on deck where the flare of a lighter might draw unwelcome attention to us. Finally I went below to the saloon and had a few, quick draws. As I was about to go on deck again I heard a subdued clank in the engine room and went to investigate.

Pierre had stripped the cover off the gearbox casing and was peering into it with the aid of a small torch. The first warnings of really serious trouble which met our eyes were several small, chewed-up chunks of metal. Pierre picked one of them out of the works and indicated to me that it had once been a ball from a ballrace. Before we could investigate further, Jean appeared at the hatch to relay the order from Jacques that the remaining engine was to be started. We were moving off out to sea again, as nobody had come to relieve us of our cargo, and Jacques felt that the sooner we were back at base the sooner we could get to work on the defaulting gearbox. I heaved a sigh of relief. I knew I should feel a lot better when we were out of the bay.

Pierre put his finger on the starter button of the starboard engine. It started, coughed and then ran on. I saw the gear go into the ahead position as Jacques operated it from the bridge.

And then it happened. The engine revs began to drop. Pierre grabbed the throttle and revved it up. No response. Slowly the needle on the r.p.m. indicator dropped lower and lower. At 500 revs it shuddered and then stayed steady for a minute, but, quite suddenly, it dropped again, and the engine faltered to a stop. Pierre jabbed the starter button once or twice but the only result was a cough, and it was obvious that this was simply wasting the batteries.

Briefly, I felt remarkably as I had done when the case had knocked me cold, a few days before. We had no engines at all. The *Nicotina* was completely helpless. The only stroke of luck was that the weather was perfect, there was not so much as a hint of wind, and only the very slightest of swells, but who was to know how long it would hold like this?

Pierre despatched me to the bridge to tell Jacques that there was a blockage in one of the fuel pipes leading to the starboard engine and that, until we had traced it, there was no hope of moving. I imparted these cheerful tidings to Jacques, expecting an explosion of rage, but I had yet to learn that this was not Jacques's way in any crisis. His confidence in Pierre as an engineer was such that he knew any breakdown of this nature was due to sheer bad luck and had to be accepted. His only comment, and a superfluous one at that, was that we should get *an* engine going again with the least possible delay.

Pierre and I set to work in the hot, still smoky atmosphere. The small torch was our only source of light, since we dared not turn on any other lights without closing both hatches, and that would have asphyxiated us altogether.

When we finally found the blockage, it was in an awkward corner where only one person could work. I remained bent double for so long, focusing the torch so that Pierre could see what he was doing, that I began to feel I would never be able to straighten myself up again. We were both running with sweat. I had flung off my sweater and slacks and hastily shoved a boiler suit over my shirt and shorts, to protect them, but I reached a stage of saturation when I could stand its thick, heavy folds no longer, and slung it off again. There-

after, I ruined yet another pair of shorts, squatting amongst the confusion of greasy tools and the dribblings of diesel oil which leaked from the offending fuel pipe.

My bruised shoulder began to ache again. Pierre cursed as a spanner slipped and he barked his knuckles. And over and above all was the tension, which had spread through the whole ship, created by our inability to move.

Eventually, Pierre sent me up on deck for some fresh air, and I sat on the ventilator box at the top of the hatch, to be within calling distance of him. The rest of the crew 'vere keeping watch on all sides, Jean standing quite near me.

When I had cooled off a little I fell to contemplating our position No engines, daylight well on the way, and a bottle-necked bay: who could ask for more? Mental pictures of rival smugglers coming upon us in our helpless state, or the ignominy of being towed into harbour by a customs boat, Italian prisons, newspaper publicity and all the resulting scandal, the financial loss of both the cargo and the ship-- all this passed through my mind

I was still wondering how long a sentence I would get when Jacques came aft. He was not any happier about our position than I was and the inactivity was too much for him.

He ordered Jean and Boris to get the dinghy and outboard motor over the side I wondered what he intended doing, while the two boys, thankful for some action after the nerve-racking wait, went to work with a will. Jean heaved the outboard up from the bosun's store and clamped it on to the dinghy. Then they swung it out on the davits and lowered it, Jean scrambling in as soon as it hit the water.

Jacques instructed him to paddle round to the bows Desperate straits called for desperate measures. He intended trying to tow the ship out of the bay with the dinghy and outboard. As soon as a line had been hitched from the bows of the ship to the stern of the dinghy, Jean started up the little motor and then laid hold of the oars and began to pull in the direction of the open sea. The sudden spluttering of the fussy engine shattered the quietness like an explosion and made me feel more jumpy than ever.

For a solid quarter of an hour the outboard fizzled and buzzed, and Jean strained at his oars, but not one foot did we move. I suppose it was too much to expect a small dinghy and outboard motor

to tow a ship of 112 feet, laden with cargo, but it was worth trying anything in our predicament.

Jacques signalled to Jean to stop the motor and once again the weighted stillness descended upon us. We hauled the dripping dinghy back aboard in silence and stowed the outboard away again.

I went back to Pierre in the engine room. The news was better. He had succeeded in clearing the blockage, at last, and was just dealing with a few air locks. Shortly afterwards the blessed sound of a healthy engine rang out into the night and we headed out of Bottleneck Bay. Not until we were well clear of the three-mile limit did the tension relax.

Even then we were by no means out of the wood. There was still the port gearbox to deal with, and that was a big job. It meant rigging up a heavy bar through the coachroof portholes, to take the block and chain tackle, and then lifting the gearbox off the engine bodily. So long as the weather held we could do it, but if it became rough there was no question of lifting such a heavy piece of machinery and having it swinging about in the engine room.

The first streaks of light were staining the sky before we were ten miles away from the rendezvous and, by the time we had reached our daytime, lying-off position, it was a glorious, sunny morning. We stopped the engine and Marie prepared breakfast.

The weather looked like holding, at least for the day, and we wasted no time in getting the gearbox off. As it hung by chains, at about waist height, Jean stood on one side of it and I at the other, to steady it, while Pierre delved into its interior.

More and more bits and pieces of smashed, distorted metal were retrieved from inside the works, and still Pierre continued to take the gears apart. Eventually, with a grunt of triumph, he extracted a shaft to which were attached the remains of what had once been a large, robust ballrace. I thumbed through the engine manual and tried to identify this from an exploded drawing of the gearbox. It appeared to be something known as a pilot race. Then I roused through our supply of spares to see whether we had any more. We had three. Jubilantly I handed one to Pierre.

We smashed the remains of the old race off the shaft and then began the tedious task of fitting the new one. It was a ham-fisted business and had to be done with the very greatest possible care, in order not to crack the inner casing of the race. Ideally, and accord-

ing to the book of words, it should have been "shrunk" on, but we had no facilities for such an operation at sea Slowly, slowly we coaxed the new race into position, tapping it cautiously with a block of wood At long last it was in place and the shaft was fitted back into the gearbox

Although the weather outside the engine room was still beautiful, the swell had increased slightly and the ship was rolling a little Lowering the gearbox back on to the engine and lining it up so that the bolts could be replaced was a nightmare Time after time Pierre tried to get the bolts into position, and time and again he had to withdraw his hand quickly as the gearbox lurched

We tried sitting on the floor and jamming our feet against it to hold it steady The heat in the engine room was terrific I was dog tired, oily and filthy, and my shoulder was aching again Jean even had the temerity to laugh at a streak of black oil which I had plastered across my forehead when pushing my sodden hair back off my face

Up on deck, Boris was on watch Jacques had gone to his cabin to catch up on some sleep, and Marie the Indefatigable was constantly pottering in and out of the engine room with refreshments

Suddenly I heard Boris shout that he had sighted a boat coming towards us, and then his feet were thwacking along the deck as he ran to Jacques's cabin to wake him Moments later, Jacques's head appeared in the hatch and he told us to start the starboard engine

Thankful for a chance of getting up on deck into the air, I joined Jacques on the bridge He was hoping that this boat would be from our shore organisation, bringing messages and news Certainly he was good and ready to tear them off a thumping big strip for letting us rendezvous for four nights in succession without meeting us

As she approached, we could see that she was a fair sized fishing vessel of some 60 feet in length Jacques peered at her through his binoculars, but his expression was far from pleased He called Boris up on to the bridge to have a look at them, and the next order I received from Jacques was to get his automatic out of his hold all and lay it on the end of his bunk where he could reach it through the doors which opened on to the bridge

Things looked interesting Boris conferred heatedly with Jacques

and it was decided that we would go to meet the fishing vessel, but keep our distance. Privately I thought that, with only one engine, keeping our distance might prove to be fraught with difficulty.

Jacques turned the *Nicotina* as fast as was possible under the circumstances. I watched him spin the wheel to bring her round to starboard, then, as the ship began to answer, spin it back again to steady her on her course towards the fishing boat. We laboured forward and the gap between the two vessels began to close rapidly.

I was still watching Jacques, at the wheel, when without warning he began frantically turning the wheel, first one way and then the other. The ship did not answer. She simply pressed on, veering slightly to port and heading as straight for the side of the fishing boat as if she had been electronically locked on a prearranged course. The next moment Jacques was shouting to Jean that the steering had packed up and to rush for the emergency tiller, at the double. Meantime, he had knocked the throttle down, swung the gear out of ahead, through neutral and into astern, and then shoved the throttle up again to the very limit of its travel.

The engine raised its voice in a bellow of effort and the super-charger shrieked with fury as the ship first lost way and then, slowly, began to go astern.

From the fishing boat it must have looked as if we were going to ram her, for she veered off her course very sharply and I caught a glimpse of startled faces aboard her as I raced towards the stern after Jean. I doubted whether he would know where the emergency tiller was, and I was none too sure myself. I knew that I had seen it, often, somewhere about the stern of the ship, and then my eyes alighted on it, lying along the starboard side of the deck, lashed to the stanchions. Of course that was where it was; I had stubbed my feet on it often enough.

We did not stop to dicker about with the lashings. Jean hacked through them with a monstrous clasp knife and speedily fitted the socket end of the tiller over the extrusion in the deck. Thereafter, in response to Jacques's hand signals from the bridge, Jean sweated from side to side of the deck, steering the ship manually.

Back on the bridge, Boris was proclaiming two facts, that the occupants of the fishing boat were nothing to do with our organisation, and that they looked like a bunch of cut-throats. They were

very close to us now, and I could see all the figures on her deck quite clearly. There were about ten or twelve of them, a dark, unshaven and villainous-looking collection of characters.

Jacques signed to Jean to bring the *Nicotina* round so that we were moving parallel with the fishing boat, and, as they drew level with us, they slowed down and shouted something through a megaphone. Jacques lowered our engine revs to idling speed and put the gear into neutral, but I noticed that he stayed within arm's reach of these controls.

The two vessels were now level and about fifty yards apart. A shouted conversation ensued, in Italian, of which I understood not a word, but there was little necessity for that. It was painfully apparent, from the gloating looks directed at our cargo of cases, stacked here and there about the decks, from the gestures and from the various firearms which were being displayed, rather ostentatiously, that something unpleasant in the way of bare-faced piracy was in the offing.

Jacques turned to me and ordered me to go below to the engine room and tell Pierre that, at all costs, he must keep the engine going. I hurried off to impart this instruction and to brief Pierre on what was happening. Jean, confined to the tiller, had heard the bellowings back and forth between the two ships, and translated the whole performance for me. The gist of it had been that the Italians had expressed a desire to buy our cargo from us, as their own ship had not yet arrived. Jacques had told them that we had our own contacts, on shore, and could not sell without their authority. This, however, was just so much flannel, for it was all too evident that, if they could get within boathook distance of us, they would board us.

Even as Jean was speaking, the fishing boat revved up abruptly and began coming towards us, obviously with the intention of coming alongside. Jacques slammed the engine into gear and threw the throttle wide open, waving commands to Jean at the tiller. The *Nicotina* shuddered as she swung hard over and began to move in a tight circle, so that we presented our stern to the fishing boat.

Boris, having been despatched to lend his weight to the tiller with Jean, I returned once more to the bridge. For the next hour and a half we fought a hectic battle of manœuvres. The fishing boat did not seem to be capable of more than about six knots and, in the ordinary

course of events, we could have left her standing. But with one engine out of action, it was as much as we could do to hold them off.

Again and again they took a run at us, to try and come alongside, and each time we twisted and turned so that they passed either across our bows or our stern. We could see the thunderous expressions on their faces as we eluded them and one particularly grim-looking specimen, in a maroon sweater and with a huge collection of hardware in his belt, brandished a flashing knife at us. The situation had all the piratical qualities such as I had never anticipated experiencing, outside of a film or book.

I do not recollect any particular sensation of fear, although I jumped when a shot went across our bows. I was lost in profound admiration for Jacques's superb handling of the ship and the perfect co-operation between him and Jean, thirty yards or more apart, and unable to shout to each other because of the intervening racket from the engine room. For sheer good seamanship it was an example to beat the band.

Despite this academic interest in the proceedings, it was not a pleasant interlude and I wondered how much longer the circus would go on. While we were moving it was, of course, impossible for any more work to be done on the port gearbox, though we had been hoping to get it finished and tested, ready for use that evening. Now there was the steering to deal with, as well.

Jacques leant against the wing of the bridge with a nonchalant air and told me to sit down and look as if I was enjoying it. I obeyed the first injunction easily enough but was not quite so successful over the second until Jacques, grinning from ear to ear, asked me if I was afraid. Without waiting for an answer, he leaned down, grasped me by the arm and pulled me up beside him. Keeping his right hand on the throttle, he slid his left arm round me, his expression one of sheer devilment, and then with all the aplomb in the world, again instructed me to look as if I was enjoying it. I simply could not help myself—I had to laugh.

Jean and Boris, observing this *volte-face* on the part of their skipper, pointed and gestured derisively at us and entered into the humour of the situation with a *wi!*, clowning out a parody of a love-scene between them, the while clutching the tiller. Overcome with laughter, I was totally unable to take our position seriously.

The scene was completed, entirely unintentionally, by Marie step-

ping with dignity out of the wheelhouse door, bearing a cup-laden tray, and with Balik trotting at her heels. Without so much as troubling to glance in the direction of the fishing boat she calmly presented the tray, from which I lifted two steaming cups of coffee for Jacques and myself. Proceeding aft, she called at the engine-room hatch and, a couple of moments later, Pierre's tangled head appeared, then a brown arm, which helped itself to a cup of coffee. Lastly she moved to the stern and was greeted enthusiastically by Boris and Jean, who removed the tray from her hands, lifted her up on to a pile of cases to keep them company and, as a final gesture of mockery, raised their cups of coffee in a toast towards the fishing boat.

I thought apoplexy would break out amongst the hi-jackers as we turned yet again and allowed them to sweep harmlessly across our stern. Without doubt they must have thought we were all utterly mad. Probably they realised that the crew was mainly French, which may have partly explained the presence of two woman on board and the blatant exhibition of affection taking place on the bridge, but how they reconciled this with the fact that it was taking place in the teeth of their attempted assault was something it was wiser not to dwell upon.

In point of fact, Jacques's action had tipped the scales for me from apprehension and worry, through amusement, to absolute confidence. With the crew all behaving in this outrageous manner it was impossible to remain unaffected by the prevailing atmosphere. Before long I was hamming and gagging with the rest of them as we maintained our weaving and dodging tactics and, at the same time, deliberately mocking the fishing boat's crew as they strove, time and again, to board us.

Poor Pierre, alone in the engine room, had the dullest time, but nothing would have induced either Marie or me to miss a moment of the fun on deck, in order to rush down and give him a running commentary.

At last, tiring of these antics, Jacques turned the *Nicotina* in a particularly tight circle and brought her on to a parallel course with the fishing boat on our starboard side. Reaching into his cabin, he handed me his automatic with instructions to cover him, but to keep it out of sight behind the wing of the bridge unless I had to use it. Then he stepped down from the bridge and went, alone and empty-handed, to the side of the ship and leaned on the rail. He started to call across

the gap between the two ships and went on speaking to them for several minutes.

I held the automatic down by my side and watched the Italians carefully. I hoped fervently that I would not have to use it. It was of a type I had never handled before and I reflected that Jacques was as likely as not to get shot in the back if anything provoked me into firing it.

It looked as though an argument was about to begin but the type in the maroon jersey, who seemed to be the leader, shrugged his shoulders and gave his helmsman an order. The next moment they sheered away from us and moved off. I sighed a great gust of relief.

Jacques stepped back on to the bridge, took the automatic from my hand and unloaded it, then tossed it back on to his bunk and sat down beside me to watch our erstwhile aggressors disappearing in the direction of the coast. Only then did I enquire what he had said to them, to induce them to leave us alone. He laughed.

Briefly, he had pointed out to them the fact that, as they could see from his use of the single gear control, he was only running one engine; he told them that they were wasting time, effort and fuel, because if he had brought in the second engine we would have left them miles behind.

The sheer bluff of it rendered me speechless.

What he had omitted to mention, rather naturally, was the fact that we could not use the second engine and badly wished to be left in peace and quiet, so that we could finish the repairs to it and also patch up our steering.

When they were completely out of sight, we stopped the starboard engine and Pierre and I returned to work on the port gearbox. By this time it was well after midday and we were all short of sleep. With the relaxation of tension I began to feel really exhausted, but there was to be no sleep until we were fully mobile again.

After warning Boris to keep a very careful watch, Jacques asked Marie to prepare lunch right away, so that we could eat and then sleep right through the afternoon until the evening meal.

Pierre, Jean and I finally succeeded in getting the gearbox bolted back on to the engine again and, thank heaven, it worked. We tested it out, first running with the starboard engine as well, then shutting that one down so as to put the full strain on the port engine and gearbox. All was well.

Next we turned our attention to the errant steering. It was a question of searching throughout the ship, along the yards and yards of copper piping, until we came across the leak. I was fortunate in finding it fairly quickly, right in the wheelhouse. Speedily Pierre patched it up and then set about the irritating business of clearing the whole system of airlocks and topping it up with can after can of hydraulic fluid. Again we started the engines and tested the steering. Jacques put it through its paces rigorously but it was satisfactory. Once more we were fully mobile and ready for anything.

I took myself off for a much-needed clean-up and then joined the others on deck for an aperitif. As soon as lunch was over I threw myself on my bunk and slept the sleep of the dead. Jacques himself took the lunch to teatime watch, then handed over to Jean.

By the time supper was over we had all managed to work in enough sleep to be going on with and, over coffee, Jacques mapped out our approaching night's activities. We would go back, once more, to the rendezvous, and see whether the right boats turned up: but if they did not, we would steam back to the *Slapstick*, still lying somewhere in the Gulf of Genoa, unship our cargo and return to port to find out what the devil was going on.

That night our luck seemed to have turned, at long last. Shortly after our arrival at the rendezvous, two launches met us and took off 100 of the cases. There was considerable acrimony between Boris and his shore-based, opposite number, to which Jacques added his own spicy comments. It seemed that there had been a great deal of trouble on shore about us muscling in on an area which, until now, had been the exclusive territory of the owners of our recent, aggressive visitor.

After a new rendezvous had been arranged, for the following night, the contact boats receded into the darkness and we moved off to our daytime position. Although, in theory, I was free to retire during the run back, more often than not I would take the watch anyway, and let Pierre get the extra sleep which he needed more than I did, for he bore the heavier responsibility. Also, I loved to watch the daylight coming up as we sped over the water.

As usual, Jean was at the wheel for the return run, and I joined him on the bridge and took the wheel, just for the sheer joy of handling the *Nicotina*. Many and many a dawn had come up while I stood at the wheel and held the ship to her course, Jean beside me, and we would discuss multifarious subjects or just talk of this life

that we led and why we were leading it. Both of us, in our different ways, wished for nothing better, Jean because he was a seaman through and through and, as he said himself, could not live without the sea, and I because I too, had salt water in my blood and had never been so happy in my life. We were both fascinated by the gambles involved in the cigarette business and, like a drug, once we had experienced it we could not leave it alone.

That day I took the deck watch from after lunch until about five in the afternoon. I was still trying to catch up on sleep lost during the hours we had laboured and striven in the engine room, over the gear-box, so, after handing over the deck watch to Boris, I returned to my bunk once again for an hour or two's slumber before supper.

I woke at about half past eight to see that evening had closed in on us. What had woken me I did not quite know, but I remember thinking that I heard a bump against the hull, somewhere about amidships. I thought nothing of it at the time, probably some driftwood was floating around. We were fifteen miles or more off Naples and there was a watch on deck. -

I lay drowsily, savouring the presence of the ship around, above and below me, then rolled over on to my side as I recollect that I ought to top up the batteries with distilled water, before supper. It was quite dark outside my portholes as I slithered off my bunk and reached for a comb. The ship was very quiet and only intermittent noises from the direction of the galley told me that Marie was preparing the meal. I heard her speak to Balik and then there was the slight clatter as the enamel plate, containing his food, went down on the floor.

My hand, holding the comb, was half way to my head when I heard footsteps belting along the deck and into the wheelhouse, above my cabin. There were a couple of frantic bangs on Jacques's cabin door. I heard it crash back against the woodwork of the wheelhouse, as it was wrenched open, then came Boris's voice, high-pitched with urgency, telling Jacques that we were on fire.

I flung down the comb and tore out of my cabin, through the saloon and into the engine room, thinking that it must be in there. Nothing was wrong. Then I noticed the glow on deck and raced up the companion ladder. As my head came above the level of the hatch coaming I was transfixed, for a moment, by the shock of the sight that met my eyes.

All the cases which had been stacked up at the stern, in readiness for the night's work, were on fire; huge flames were roaring up from them to a terrifying height, certainly higher than the mast, and the whole of that part of the deck was an inferno. Jacques came racing out of the wheelhouse and ran towards the fire, intending to call out Pierre, who was still asleep below. He could not get near the wardroom hatch, it was surrounded by burning cases. He doubled back and leapt down the engine-room hatch which I had just climbed through. I remember being thankful that we had cut the passage through the tank bay and into the wardroom, for Jacques went straight through that way and roused Pierre at top speed. The two of them, with Jean, came tearing back through the engine room and up on deck, collecting fire extinguishers and buckets on their way. I had already seized an extinguisher myself, but it was too heavy for me to operate and I handed it over to Jacques.

As he took it, he ordered me to start the engines and then go to the bridge and turn the ship into the wind, such as there was, so that it would blow the flames over the stern and keep them away from the fuel tanks. Down in the engine room again, both engines started like angels and I dived up to the bridge.

All four of the boys were hard at it with buckets of water as I spun the wheel and the ship began to move. Watching the flames over my shoulder, I turned her until I was satisfied that she was taking advantage of what little breeze was to be had. The four figures, blackly silhouetted against the leaping reds and oranges, were hauling up bucketfuls of water and hurling it over the conflagration, desperately pulling away from the heart of the fire such cases as had not already caught, and picking up the flaming ones bodily and throwing them overboard. I suddenly thought of their hands and, leaving the wheel for a moment, rushed into the engine room for an armful of clean rags, which I plunged into the next bucket of water to come up over the side, and handed round. Jacques called a hurried thanks before despatching me back to the bridge to hold the ship in position.

The light wind was doing its work well. The flames were leaning over the stern, out over the blood-red water and, mercifully, right away from the fuel tanks. I was more thankful than ever that we had converted to diesels. Had there been high-octane petrol in the tanks, the *Nicotina* would have blown to glory minutes before.

It seemed that hours passed while the crew battled with the blazing,

raging holocaust of cases. I stood helplessly on the bridge, aching to join in the battle with a bucket, but bound to the wheel by orders to keep the ship into the wind. Then, in the midst of the hellish scene, I saw something so funny that I laughed out loud, scarcely able to believe my eyes.

Jean, pausing in the act of throwing yet another bucketful of water into the fire, had grabbed Jacques's arm and drawn his attention to the dinghy. There, sitting cockily on the stern seat, was Balik, patiently waiting for the order to abandon ship and obviously determined to make sure of a place in the lifeboat. Never before had he been known to jump into the dinghy, and none of us ever saw him do it again, afterwards, but the fact remained that he was sitting firmly in it now, his head on one side and a sort of "I'm all right, Jack" expression on his face. As I have remarked before, Balik was a very intelligent little dog, albeit something of a defeatist on this occasion.

But his precaution was unnecessary, as it turned out. Slowly the fire came under control. Gradually the darkness pressed closer and closer around the ship, as the fire subsided, until the obscurity of night enfolded the *Nicotina* and all was black. I left the wheel and went aft to request permission from Jacques to stop engines. With their uproar stilled, everything seemed eerily quiet, all the more so after the urgency of the recent crisis.

Having had a final check to see that there were no further sparks or smoulderings, Jacques called us all below to the saloon, with the exception of Jean who remained on watch. We hastily started our delayed supper and, at the same time, held a post-mortem on the fire. We had no idea, at that time, what had started it, other than the unlikely possibility of a cigarette end, but that still did not explain why the fire had burned with such ferocity. Jacques was determined to get to the bottom of the whole mystery, and the facts were slowly pieced together, but it was not until later that we were able to form an accurate idea of how it had happened.

Boris had been on watch, sitting on a pile of cases and reading. As it began to get too dark to see the print, he had closed the book and then decided to go below and ask Jean to take over the watch whilst he had a shave before supper. Jean had agreed, but the two of them had lingered, talking; Boris in the bathroom, already at work with the razor, and Jean standing in the open doorway. They

had heard nothing untoward, and I was the only person who could recall anything strange—the faint bump I had heard just as I was waking up.

After supper we trooped back on deck and began to clear away some of the wreckage. It was pretty bad. The wardroom hatch, ventilators and ventilator boxes had been quite badly damaged and there was ash everywhere. Partly burnt cases were scattered all over the place and the mess was indescribable.

We set to work with brooms, sweeping the ash overboard. Suddenly Jacques called a halt and pointed to the deck where he was standing, and which he had just swept clear. There, clearly burned into the teak was a neat rectangle, the exact size of a case of cigarettes. It was as though a finger of fire had traced round the case which had been standing there, burning the outlines deep into the wood. Jacques had found the answer and, at the same time, it explained why the fire had raged with such fury. The explanation was quite simple. Petrol.

As we carried on with our sweeping and exposed more of the deck to view, there were other deep scorings, just like the first. The whole sequence of events quickly became apparent to all of us, as we stood on the deck in the light of a leadlamp which I had run out from the engine room, suspending it from the wire that normally supported the awnings. Feebly it held back the muffling darkness but starkly it showed up the scars in the ship's decks and, in them, the vicious intention of a deliberate attempt at arson.

It did not require much intelligence to realise who had made that attempt. Our "friends" of a couple of days before, frustrated in their attempts to board us, and further infuriated by the fact that we had managed to land half our cargo, thereby spoiling their own market, had settled on this particular means of revenge.

They must have come out in the fishing boat, for we were over fifteen miles off shore, arriving in our vicinity at dusk. Probably they had stopped whilst still a mile or so away from us, so that we would not hear their engine, and then a dinghy must have been employed to transport the firebugs and their petrol close to us. The bump I had thought I heard was probably their dinghy, and their luck was in when Boris went below and Jean lingered to talk to him before taking over the watch on deck. In those few minutes they had poured petrol over the ready-stacked cases and set it alight.

No doubt they rowed like mad to get away from the ship, once they saw that the cargo was well ablaze, but none of us had spared so much as a second to glance round and try to spot anybody. We were all too intent on dealing with the fire and trying to get it under control. But then their luck ran out for, instead of the whole ship burning up, we had managed to beat the fire out.

Not that their efforts had gone entirely unrewarded. A little matter of sixty cases had been hurled or kicked over the side in the conflagration, representing a loss of some \$2,500, and, in addition, others were partly damaged and would have to be sold at half the usual price.

Nevertheless, we were lucky to be alive and still on board a fully mobile ship, and Jacques delivered a potent dissertation on the subject of our aggressors, during which he theorised at some length on their parentage. Then I started the engines and we headed straight for the night's rendezvous, rushing through the darkness with stray ashes and general gash still blowing off the decks.

Great was the consternation among the shore organisation when we met the contact boats that night and told them of our ordeal by fire. We described it in such detail, and wished them good luck in getting the remainder of the cases ashore with such fervour, that they were thoroughly put out and did not relish their night's work. However, we were glad to be rid of the cargo and we lost no time in pushing off and leaving them to it.

We were all relieved to be quitting that particular area. It had been a far from lucky vent. e, oming down to Naples, and I, for one, was delighted that we were now on our way back to the *Slapstick* and to our familiar, happy hunting grounds in the Gulf of Genoa.

The expression "See Naples and die" had been much in my mind during the past few days. We had only seen it from a great distance off shore and I could not help wondering whether, if we had taken a closer look at the city, we would have got the fire out or not. One tends to become superstitious at sea.

Daylight found us well on our way back to our home waters and brought with it a break in the wonderful spell of weather. During the couple of days we were ploughing our path towards a rendezvous with the *Slapstick* and a further consignment of cases, the sea slowly

built up into a respectably rough condition. By the time we had found the depot ship it was quite ferocious.

Jacques took the *Nicotina* fairly close in to the *Slapstick* and the two ships turned together into the seas, but five minutes sufficed to indicate that any plans we had for going alongside would have to be modified. Jacques bawled through the loud hailer to Tommy, asking him to turn and try running with the sea, in the hope that it might be possible for us to get closer in, but this proved to be no better and, for the time being, we could do nothing but wait until the weather moderated.

All that day and night, and throughout the following day and night, we plodded slowly backwards and forwards over the expanse of roaring waters. Always the two ships remained within sight of each other, usually moving on parallel courses about half a mile apart. On the third morning the wind had dropped considerably, but there was still a big swell and the *Nicotina* was gyrating wildly.

Jacques moved her in to within shouting distance and asked Tommy to keep the *Slapstick* running slowly while he brought the *Nicotina* as close as he dared and tried to hold her parallel. During the brief spells when we were "alongside," the *Slapstick's* crew went to work with a will and chucked the cases over on to our decks in a rush. It rained cases. They landed everywhere and anyhow and we all kept well out of the way whilst the bombardment was on.

Then we would turn and come in again, picking up any cases that had landed in the water on our way round.

Those people not occupied in fishing cargo out of the drink scurried round, clearing the decks as best they could in readiness for the next onslaught. I kicked, pushed and heaved cases with the others and, when the cargo began to fly again, thudding and cracking down on our decks, I took refuge on the bridge with Jacques and lurked there, in comparative safety, until the next deck-clearing session.

So it went on, and I lost count of the number of times we closed with the *Slapstick* and endured this unorthodox method of loading up.

At last Tommy signalled that he was empty, and, waving cheerio until next month, set his course for Tangier.

We cruised about alone for the rest of the day, sorting and stacking the cargo and preparing for the night's work ahead.

A surprise awaited us at the rendezvous that evening. When the contact boats came alongside, two additional figures climbed aboard the *Nicotina* behind the haggle man. They were Louis and André, all agog to know how things had gone in the Naples area.

Jacques lost no time in telling them. While Boris and the haggle man were closeted below decks, Louis and André stood on the bridge with Jacques and heard a detailed account of the whole wretched business; the nights when we rendezvoused and nobody came near us; the attempted boarding; the fire and, last but not least, the fact that they had lost some \$3,000-worth of cargo.

It was a very subdued pair who returned to the shore in the contact boats, perched on the night's delivery of cases. I did not think, somehow, that they would send us to Naples again.

Having given them a few minutes' start, we moved off ourselves and continued under way throughout the night. The swell was still much too great to allow us to lie stopped and there was nothing for it but to press on. No more lounging about on deck in the sunshine or swimming in turquoise water beneath a Mediterranean-blue sky. The elements seemed to feel that they had dealt kindly with us for long enough and were now busy reminding us of their less pleasant capabilities.

The *Nicotina* sauntered disgustedly across the turbid, confused water, creaking gruffly as she rolled. Her whole attitude was that of a person condemned to a treadmill, knowing that they had to keep moving but depressed by the uselessness of their labours. She kept going because she couldn't stop; to have done so would have caused her to perform far wilder gyrations than she did whilst under way, and inflicted fearful damage on all the loose gear in the ship. Marie would have been unable to cook at all, nor would any of us have had any sleep to speak of.

None of these excellent reasons for remaining in motion appealed to her, however, and she was sluggish and sullen. I could sense her resentment strongly and she produced a new groan, somewhere directly under my bunk, which, because it was unfamiliar, kept me awake when I should have been catching up on much-needed sleep.

It was a relief to set off for the rendezvous again and to have work to do, instead of mooching about in an aimless manner as

we had been doing all day. The tiresome thing was that the sea really did not look all that rough, yet, when we conducted the experiment of stopping, the ship immediately began to roll so violently that the movement was unendurable. She rolled in crescendos, starting quite mildly and working herself up into a perfect frenzy.

When I had first experienced this sort of behaviour, I had been quite alarmed. It seemed to me that the momentum she built up, as the crescendo increased, would turn her right over. It never did, of course, and in time I became accustomed to the whole business, just as I did to other of her less attractive habits.

Rather wearily I had taken over the watch from Pierre, and sat at the top of the hatch musing on the fact that something approaching gale force had made its appearance in the Gulf a few hours before we had started towards the scene of the night's appointment. Then the weather began to deteriorate again, very rapidly, and Jacques remarked, when I paid him a brief visit on the bridge, that we would be lucky if we managed to unship much cargo in the next few hours.

For once in a while the contact boats were there before us, and, in order to give them a dog's chance of getting alongside without smashing themselves to matchwood, we moved very, very close in to the shore. There, comparatively protected from the worst of the wind and sea, we off-loaded another consignment and made arrangements for them to take the remaining hundred or so cases the following night.

About an hour and some ten miles later I was on the bridge with Jean, who had the wheel, my arm wrapped around the mast to retain my balance. Pierre was on watch in the engine room.

Without warning, the port throttle shot down to the idling position and the port gear lever beside me went into neutral. I whipped to the engine-room hatch and peered down, to be met by a lot of black smoke. It required little intelligence to conclude that the port gearbox had packed up again. Pierre emerged with a grim expression on his face and, in answer to my raised eyebrows, simply nodded.

This was a very serious matter, for the weather was far too bad to attempt any repairs. Had the gearbox been unbolted from the engine, even assuming that we could have done it at all in this sort of a sea, it would simply have swung straight through the side of the ship.

Jacques was roused and given the bad tidings. It was not as if we could limp back into harbour on the starboard engine; we still had cargo aboard, which put all ports completely out of bounds. The *Slapstick* had already left for Tangier, so it was impossible to dump the cases back aboard her. There seemed to be no alternative but to cruise around until the weather moderated, and heaven only knew how long that would be.

Jacques decided that we would not keep the rendezvous the next night. It had been arranged for a place which was uncomfortably close to the Fairmile customs boat's base, and he considered that, with only one engine, the risk was a bad one. Furthermore, the shore organisation, upon being informed that we had not turned up, would begin to wonder about us and might even take some active steps to do something useful. There was some small satisfaction to be derived from the thought that the contact boats would wait at the rendezvous in vain, a taste of their own medicine.

Seventy-two hours meandered by and, throughout the time, we cruised around the Gulf on our starboard engine, while the sea tossed and battered and beat us about Skulking in the engine room during my watches, I glared at the port gearbox and muttered bilingual imprecations over it. At meals we relieved our feelings by cursing the shore organisation up hill and down dale.

Eventually, Jacques came to a somewhat uncomfortable decision. It appeared to us that we were being left to rot out here and that, for all anybody on shore cared, we could shunt around the Gulf of Genoa till we were old and grey, and the *Nicotina* assumed the guise of a ghost ship.

There seemed nothing for it but to go back to a point just outside the three-mile limit, off Villefranche, and send Jean and Boris ashore in the dinghy to rustle up some sort of action.

This course was not decided upon without considerable thought. The last thing we wanted to do was to embarrass anybody in Villefranche, least of all the French customs, and Jacques was determined that we would not go inside French territorial waters, but it meant a long, rough ride for Jean and Boris, in such a small boat, and it also left us without any means of escape, should anything else go wrong. The canoe, in that kind of weather, would have been completely suicidal. However, something just had to be done.

That night we crept, guiltily, as close as we dared to the French

coast and launched the dinghy. The outboard started without fuss and the little boat disappeared into the darkness, carrying with it our fervent good wishes for its occupants' survival. When it had gone, we turned and moved further out to sea, resuming our plodding to and fro, whilst we waited for help.

At daybreak we knew that the two boys had made it safely. The messenger boat could be seen, wallowing her way out to us and, in the process, taking even worse treatment from the seas than we were.

She did not even attempt to come alongside but drew level with us and, while the two vessels butted in to punishing head seas, a bellowed conversation took place between Jacques, on our bridge, and André, in the messenger boat. The gist of it was that they could do nothing to help us for the time being. There was no other ship in port to take over our cargo and, until one did return from her own job, we would just have to sweat it out. The only slightly optimistic note was that weather reports anticipated improvement in the weather and, if this came about, we might be able to get the gearbox off again.

How Boris and Jean managed to get from the pitching deck of the messenger boat and into the dinghy, which was being towed behind her, then across to us and on board again, was nothing short of fantastic. The poor old dinghy took one almighty whacking against our side as we struggled and fought to pick it out of the water. At length, soaked and swearing, the two boys were back aboard and the messenger boat headed back to Villefranche. The *status quo* had been maintained.

During the next forty-eight hours we cruised hither and thither, anxiously watching the weather and, at the same time, keeping roughly to the route we thought that returning ships heading back to Villefranche would take. We saw no one. But we did observe an improvement in the weather. Excruciatingly slowly the wind dropped and the seas began to abate. This still left a good, hearty swell, and we watched it with the most morbid interest, hour by hour, and almost minute by minute, as we waited for it to subside. Pierre was the first to announce that he could stand it no longer. He had been itching to get at the offending gearbox and, with Jacques's reluctant permission, we set to work.

It was a dangerous business. We tried everything we knew to wedge the box steady, once it was detached from the engine, using

ropes, chains, iron bars and various other impedimenta of a curiously assorted nature.

Out came the shaft again and fortunately, although the race was beyond recall, Pierre had managed to stop the engine so quickly that there was much less damage than the first time. I delved around for one of the two remaining spare races and we began the tortuous task of getting it into place. Half way through the job the inner casing of the race cracked. I could hardly bear to look at Pierre and neither of us even commented. In any case, the starboard engine was roaring away beside us and this effectively discouraged conversation.

I went to the box for the third and last spare race. Fraction by fraction of inches—probably Pierre was working in centimetres, but it was inches to me—we coaxed it into position. At about the half-way point, where its predecessor had cracked, it stuck for what seemed an interminable length of time. Then it was on.

The remarriage of the gearbox to the engine was an operation which went far beyond my powers of description. The atmosphere was tense and hot, the constant noise beat about the head, the ship pitched and jerked about and, all the while, there was the ever-present likelihood that one of us was going to break the odd finger or arm.

And when the work had been completed I felt no happier. I could not get the idea out of my head that this final race might collapse like the previous ones. I couldn't bear to stay in the engine room when Pierre pressed the starter button and gingerly put the port engine into gear. It held, for the time being, anyway.

Being now fully mobile again, Jacques immediately turned his attention to the matter of getting rid of the last of our cargo and, once again, we set off in the direction of the Gulf of Genoa.

Half an hour later, one cylinder in the starboard engine went out of action. I was right in the middle of having a wash when I heard the unevenness and flew to the engine room, my face still covered with soap. Pierre was just stopping the engine as I entered. He thought it was number 4 cylinder, so we changed the injector and started her up again. No improvement. Then we changed number 6. Finally we changed all six of them and still number 4 would not fire.

This final blow turned us in our tracks back towards Villefranche. We reduced revs on the port engine, to save strain on the gearbox, and limped along with the five cylinders firing on the starboard.

Then another cylinder went out, and then a third. I was fascinated to discover that the engine would run at all on three cylinders. It did not do so for long. Overburdened with the tremendous amount of extra work it had had to do, during the periods when the port engine was out of commission, it gave up at last, leaving us still far out at sea, still enduring a fair swell and still with 100 cases of cigarettes on board, at the mercy of a willing port engine with its unpredictable gearbox.

There was nothing to be done but wait. And so we waited.

Rescue came, at length, in the shape of the *Four Hands*. On a grey, hostile morning, she approached us with André, Louis, Mike and a spare hand, Nigel, on board, skippered by her owner. The wheel of Fate had turned in a complete circle. Once we had relieved her of her cargo; now she was performing the same service for us.

As usual, it was impossible for the two ships to go alongside; both were rolling heavily. The only alternative was to go stern to stern. Skittishly the two vessels backed up to each other and ropes were made fast between them. Jacques wanted to stop our engine, in order to save it as much as possible, so he ordered the *Four Hands* to go ahead as slowly as she could, towing us astern, while the cases were hurled and thrown from the *Nicotina* as fast as possible. Frequently the two sterns seemed about to collide and several times the thick, stout ropes snapped like bits of string. It took over two hours.

Jacques, Boris, Jean, Pierre and Marie were somehow transferred to the *Four Hands*, complete with Balik, whilst Louis, André, Mike and Nigel made the opposite journey. For a couple of moments I was entirely alone on the *Nicotina* and I hoped, fervently, that no rope would give way just at that point.

Before making the dangerous jump from one stern to the other, Jacques asked me if I wanted to go with them, in the *Four Hands*, to finish the job off. I refused. I could not possibly desert the *Nicotina* in her present state, much as I would have liked to join them in the *Four Hands*, and Jacques did not argue with me. I was always grateful to him for the suggestion, but he realised, and understood, what I felt for the *Nicotina* and he showed no surprise at my decision. I think he had anticipated it.

Speedily and thankfully we cast off from the *Four Hands* and I went below to start the port engine again. It wouldn't start.

The *Four Hands* was standing by, intending to see us safely under

way before leaving us and, as the minutes passed and we did not move, Jacques brought her in close and shouted to know what was wrong.

Mike had joined me in the engine room. The trouble was another fuel blockage somewhere.

The voyage out in the *Four Hands*, in the heavy sea, had taken its toll of him and the engine room was just about the last place he should have been. We wasted no time searching for the blockage. So much damage had occurred already that a few broken fuel pipes were neither here nor there. We ripped them away from the engine and inserted the spout of a funnel. Pouring diesel oil in from a five gallon can, we got the engine going again and the *Four Hands*, unaware of the drastic measures by which we had achieved this, turned away and left us.

Nigel, the extra hand who had come out with the *Four Hands* to help us, proved to be a past master in coping with emergencies such as this. He was the skipper of another "B" class Fairmile, newly arrived in Villefranche, and a cooler customer in handling a difficult situation it would be very hard to find, Jacques excepted.

Ex-Royal Navy, he was a big, tall man with thick, black hair and a bushy beard to match it. Brown eyes looked out from under heavy, black eyebrows and, had it not been for his friendly, reassuring smile, he would have given the impression of tremendous ferocity.

Calmly and confidently he took control of the entire situation and set about the task of getting the *Nicotina* into harbour.

With André at the wheel we stumbled homewards, lame and halt, and all the way there I poured fuel by hand into the port engine and forced myself to believe that we would make it to the port. Crawling round Cap Ferrat we finally saw the harbour entrance, or rather, those on deck did. For myself, I seemed to have been nursing that engine all my life.

Nigel was a positive tower of strength. He encouraged and cheered us all on, me especially, for I was just about out for the count, and terrified that we would never get my beloved ship to safety. I suffered all kinds of apprehension: about her being blown on to the shore and beached, or wrecked on rocks, but for each negative theory I advanced, Nigel produced a positive answer, convincing at the time, because I so badly wanted to be convinced. But I knew,

afterwards, that if the engine had given out on the way back, there would have been little hope for the *Nicotina*.

When we were inside the harbour, at last, and securely tied up, Nigel signalled down that I could stop the engine. I didn't even stop it; I just stopped pouring fuel in.

I lurched to my cabin, threw myself on my bunk and, burying my head in the pillow, I sobbed with relief. Then, as the tension relaxed, I slept for sixteen hours, straight off.

Her Last Voyage

FOR two days after our return to port I did nothing but eat, sleep and take it easy. I was physically, mentally and nervously exhausted.

On the third day I went ashore to the local hotel and hired a bathroom for the morning. The proprietor was quite accustomed to this kind of thing and I spent the whole morning in the bath, slowly soaking away the weariness and the dirt together. Then I had some lunch, went back to the ship and did a lot more sleeping.

After that I was ready to start work again, which was as well, since there was plenty of it to be done.

Mike's remarks, when he had surveyed the condition of the ship thoroughly, including the fire damage and the state of the engine room, cannot be given here. I almost got the impression that he felt we had done it all on purpose. Furthermore, it set him off again, laying down the law about me going with the *Nicotina*, and he raised hell about it. But it had as much effect on me as water off a duck's back.

In this somewhat vitriolic atmosphere we set about putting the ship to rights. At first we thought it would be a matter of some two or three weeks' work, but it was quickly brought home to us that nothing but a complete overhaul of both engines would do. And so it was many weary weeks before the *Nicotina* was back on form again.

A shattering discovery was made when Pierre returned with the *Four Hands* and came aboard to ask whether we had changed the race in the port gearbox again. I said no, since we had dragged ourselves into harbour on it, and it had been working perfectly. Then Pierre suggested that we should change it yet again because, he said, when it was being persuaded on to the shaft it, too, had cracked, very, very slightly. Mercifully he had not told me at the time, and we had come all the way home on that cracked race.

I had a second shock, one afternoon, when I was sitting astride

the port engine, its cylinder head and sump off Mike was prostrate beneath it, trying to coax one of the sleeves out. As he pushed from below, I pulled from above, but this one was particularly obstinate and did not seem to want to emerge from the block at all. Just as Mike was exhorting me to pull harder the thing came out in a rush, and I very nearly fell over backwards. Then I observed, astoundedly, that I was holding only half a sleeve. There was a clean break right the way round it, through the portion where the ports are drilled. How long it had been in the engine like that we had no means of knowing.

Another matter which we sorted out was the fact that we had been using the wrong type of gearbox oil. The grade we had been recommended to use was not suited to the boxes at all, in actual fact, and this explained the trouble with the port gearbox.

While we were about it, we did the whole job thoroughly. We had the cylinder heads off both engines, the sumps off, all the pistons, sleeves, valves and seats out. All the injectors, including spares, went ashore for servicing, and we even stripped down the starboard gearbox, to make sure that nothing was damaged in it.

Next, Mike turned his attention to the wreckage on deck, and, being a handy carpenter, he patched up the burnt wardroom hatch and ventilator box pretty well, replacing the ventilator itself with a spare one which the *Pinch of Salt* happened to have, stowed away in her forepeak. But the deep lines charred into the deck itself were another matter; short of replacing the planking itself, there was little to be done except clean them up as best we could. So they were left as a rather grim reminder of the fire.

During the monotonous weeks of work two incidents relieved the boredom, although I cannot truthfully say that either of them were pleasant or welcome.

The first occurred only a few days after we had brought the battered and damaged *Nuotina* into port. It took place in the very wee, small hours of the morning, somewhere about 1.30 a.m., when I was fast asleep. A gigantic explosion rent the quiet night lying over the harbour. Not unnaturally, it woke me up and I roamed up on deck, in pyjamas and bare feet, to investigate.

I stood in the darkness, listening for signs of some sort of reaction but could hear nothing. After a while I began to wonder whether I had dreamt it all, but I was pretty sure it had been real; it had been

so tremendously loud and had a hollow, echoing sort of quality about it. By then, my feet were beginning to suffer from the coldness of the decks and I betook myself back to my bunk.

Morning provided an answer to the mystery. Another member of the Nicotine Navy, a small ship of unbelievable age but incredible durability, had somehow incurred the ill-will of a party, or parties, unknown. At the time, she was lying in the drydock undergoing a repaint. Her enemies had affixed a home-made, sticky bomb to the bottom of her hull. Luckily for her crew of three, who were all sleeping aboard, it had failed to blow them to smithereens, only succeeding in making a fearful noise, the volume of which had been increased to terrifying proportions by the effect of the high drydock walls all round.

Her skipper, nicknamed "Boogie-Woogie," told me over a drink, two or three evenings later, that he had a very shrewd idea of who had been responsible for the attack, but he didn't tell me, and I didn't want to know. Peculiar things happened to ships, sometimes, and it was best to mind one's own business and keep out of other people's.

There had been the odd case of a ship's propellers being lashed round and round with wire cable, so that when she started her engines, the props were thoroughly chewed up and nearly pulled out by the roots.

Then it was my turn, with the second event. I returned to the ship late one night, having spent the evening in the casino, in Nice. As I came aboard, Mike called up to me to be careful in the passage between my cabin and the bathroom, as he had taken up the floorboards to extract some coal from the bunkers beneath them. I acknowledged the warning and, the next moment, something else drew my attention and it went clean out of my head.

I breezed merrily along the passage and straight down the coal-hole. It was not a big drop, only three or four feet down to the pile of coal itself, but the force with which I descended flung me forward and I caught the edge of the flooring right in my left side, just above the waist.

For several seconds I had no idea what had hit me, then the pain jabbed at me and I collapsed on the heap of coal. The next moment I realised that Mike, who had been in the galley stoking the boiler and heard nothing, was coming back to replace the boards. I was

petrified by the thought of being shut down there in total darkness, with the pain stabbing through it in red and yellow flashes, and managed to draw sufficient breath to let out a squeak of warning, whereupon Mike's astonished face appeared through the open floor above me.

The agony of being pulled out by my arms was indescribable, but I endured it somehow and lumbered into my cabin, assuring Mike that I was only winded. By what means I got myself on to my bunk I do not know and, once on it, I could only lie face downwards. Sleep was out of the question, so I just lay there al' night.

By morning I knew that something was very wrong; this was no common-or-garden bruise. I shuffled ashore, telling Mike that I was going to do some shopping, and got a bus into Nice. There, after some enquiry, I found an English-speaking doctor who examined me and insisted that I went into hospital immediately.

I dragged myself back to the *Nicotina*, cursing the crowds on the buses who seemed to take a delight in digging me in the side with their elbows, and broke the glad news to Mike. Then I was whisked off to the local hospital and put to bed, thoroughly X-rayed and buried in plaster. I had cracked a couple of ribs.

The first two days and nights were hell, then the pain began to subside slowly and, after a week, I was agitating to get out. The doctor was strongly against this, but at the end of ten days I bullied him into discharging me and returned to the ship still well plastered up.

The *Four Hands* had just returned from her current job and the boys greeted me jovially in the local bar which we usually frequented. They had not heard about my mishap and it was only when I winced as I tried to seat myself on a rather high bar stool that Jacques noticed anything wrong.

By now it was well into winter. Another Christmas in France had come and gone and the first week in February saw us proceeding out of Villefranche into the bay for engine trials, Jacques at the wheel, and Mike and Pierre both down in the engine room, keeping a very watchful eye on things.

Jacques was ruthless and relentless in his testing of the ship. We were out there for more than four hours, and he did everything with her bar standing her on her stem. At long last he pronounced himself satisfied with her and we turned back towards the harbour.

'The *Nicotina* was quite delighted with herself, prancing through the water like a two-year-old and shrugging the spray off her decks with great abandon, her bows slicing through the water and flinging it aside in sheets of spreading, white foam. Steadily the engines held their duet and contentedly the propellers churned the sea. Her convalescence over, the *Nicotina* was ready for work again.

Though I did not know it at the time, this was to be our last job. Afterwards, when we had returned to port and the blow had fallen, I was thankful beyond measure that I had not known.

We had faint misgivings, all of us, for shortly before our departure a rumour had flashed round that the Italians were about to acquire a faster customs boat, something capable of around 25 knots. It was only a rumour, at that time, and our shore organisation had been unable to confirm it. The only thing they were sure of was that the Italians hadn't got the vessel yet.

We knew that, sooner or later, the activities of all the ships in the Nicotine Navy must surely jibe the Italian customs authorities into more comprehensive measures for dealing with us. In a way we signed our own death warrant, by driving them to the expedient of acquiring a ship far faster than the *Nicotina* and the rest of her sister ships. The only one of us still likely to stay in business was the *Black Cracker*. With her petrol engines and top speed of some 19 knots she was not worried about giving away some 5 or 6 knots to the customs; but for the rest of us the possibility of having to exert a little prudence and retire from the game was very real.

Meantime, the rumour was still only a rumour and we set sail from Villefranche in our usual, carefree style. For me, it was the culmination of all the weeks of work on the ship. To be back on the job with the same, wonderful crew, to feel the *Nicotina* rushing over the water in her eagerness to get to grips with her task, just to stand on the bridge and feel the cold, February wind lashing my face, all set the seal on my certainty that this was my way of life.

When I had watched the *Four Hands* taking over our job, all those weeks before, and turned away to bring the shattered *Nicotina* back into shelter where she could lick her wounds, it had seemed inconceivable that she would ever again take her place in the ranks of cigarette runners. But, although she had trailed herself into port, literally on her last gasp, bodily broken and crushed, the spirit of her had been untouched. That indefinable essence which was embedded

in the very bones of her frame and entrenched in every stringer and plank of her hull, and which saturated her through and through, had remained intact.

We had been late in leaving, on this particular occasion, as there had been so many last-minute technicalities, and we were the last to move out of harbour, with a new moon due that night. There was a good, fresh wind blowing and the sea was fairly active, but the sun beamed benevolently upon us and I was well content.

Our meeting with Tommy and the *Slapstick* was quite something; I was so pleased to see him again and he appeared equally delighted to find the *Nicotina* back in action. I went aboard and stood on the *Slapstick's* bridge with Tommy while the cases were brought up from her holds, a glass of celebrating mixture firmly in my hand.

Tommy excused himself for a few minutes and departed to his cabin, returning with a bulky, white envelope which he presented to me with a broad grin. Ripping it open, I found myself the possessor of a maroon, silk tie. Hand painted on it were pictures of four packets of cigarettes, representing the various brands we carried.

Nothing on earth could have given me a greater kick and I hugged Tommy as enthusiastically as I was able, despite my tender ribs. For all that it represented, I treasured that tie far more highly than any old school tie has ever been valued; and I still do.

Tommy then enquired about my recovery from the knock out I had received the last time we had been out. I told him he was way behind on the news, that I had cracked a couple of ribs during my enforced stay in port and was still plastered up. Tommy's generosity with the drink was such that I should have been doubly plastered had I remained there much longer, but loading was about to start and I made my way gingerly over the heaving gap between the two ships, clutching my precious tie, and occupied myself with a fender while the cargo came over.

I was still not able to help very actively, because my ribs protested vigorously when I tried to handle cases, but I could manage to get around perfectly well and was able to stand my watches in the engine room as usual. Jacques had been just a shade doubtful about my coming on this trip, but I had pleaded with him so fervently that he had given in. What I had omitted to tell him was that I still had the plaster on. I reasoned that he would be happier without that

knowledge. Fortunately the weather was too cold for swimming or sunning, so he was not likely to find out.

Our consignment aboard, we sheered away from the *Slapstick* and turned our bows in the direction of the Gulf of Genoa. On the bridge besides Jacques, I remarked acidly that I trusted we were not going to Naples. His reply was of an unprintable nature but I gathered that we were not.

Early evening found us downing our supper before starting the night's work. Steaks, luscious salad and superb cheese emerged from the galley and Marie really did us proud. She always did, but the first two or three days of any trip were exceptional, because the food was all fresh. Later on we would work our way through to the tinned, dried and otherwise preserved provender.

I was never very enthusiastic about vegetables but Marie had a complex about us all getting scurvy or some such complaint and, as long as the supply of greenery lasted out, she would stand over us all, even Jacques, and see that we had our proper shares. I had several battles with her, all of which I lost because she threatened me with vitamin pills if I did not heed her efforts to supervise and regulate our diets. I quite believed she had some, too, tucked away somewhere.

Before I conquered my seasickness, Marie used to drive both herself and me nearly mad with trying to persuade me to eat something. That was the kind of person she was, in the culinary field, at any rate, she mothered us all. Once she even petitioned Jacques, in his capacity as skipper, to order me to eat something she thought I should have and, what was more, Jacques actually did make it an order, and so I had to ram it down somehow.

Our rendezvous that night went with gratifying precision and we were some 170 cases lighter as we crossed the three-mile limit and sped out to sea again. The next two nights were complete fiascos, however, as nobody came out to meet us. Then, on the fourth night, we unshipped another 100 cases but were met with the information that things were getting very tough on shore. In an effort to sabotage the widespread bribery and co-operation that was going on amongst the customs men stationed round and about the Gulf of Genoa, the authorities had ordered a complete reshuffle of personnel, those in the Gulf being despatched to the south of Italy, and men from there being brought north to the Gulf. This caused us considerable delay,

as it took time for the shore organisation to make reliable contacts amongst the new arrivals. We were instructed, therefore, not to rendezvous for another week.

The others fretted at this delay in operations, particularly Jacques, who had many things to consider, such as the state of the moon and the amount of fuel we had available. However, there was nothing to be done about it; we were entirely dependent upon the shore organisation to take the cargo from us and we could hardly complain if they were cautious over making new arrangements.

There was some talk of dumping the remainder of our cases back aboard the *Slapstick* and returning to Villefranche for a few days, while the shore people sorted out both themselves and the new customs. But this idea was quickly scotched by Louis, who wanted us to remain in the Gulf so that he could call us in quickly, once he had made the necessary contacts.

All through the seven days and nights we ambled back and forth in the Gulf of Genoa, running first on one engine and then on the other, so as to distribute the hours equally between them. Though it was not rough, the weather was not of the variety in which we could lie stopped, so the regular routine of watches carried on, and we covered mile upon mile of useless distance.

For myself, I did not care one way or another. It was enough for me to be at sea with the *Nicotina*, and whether we were smuggling or just cruising made little difference, though I had gained a taste for the excitement of a rendezvous and was not in the least averse to a good night's work. The days slipped by and I was well satisfied with my lot.

The only event of any note, during this fallow period, was that we went alongside the *Slapstick* again and loaded up with more cargo to replace that which we had already delivered. Tommy swore heartily on hearing of the hold-up, but then resigned himself philosophically to the prospect of a long hang-around. The only thing that really worried him was whether we would be able to take all his cargo off in time to let him get to Tangier for another consignment and back up to the Gulf for the next month's operations.

The night fixed for the rendezvous came around in due course and we made our way towards it, the ship darkened and everything in readiness. Arriving in the designated position, we stopped our engines and settled down to wait for the contact boats. The ship rolled fairly

heavily and I noticed a deep, clangng noise coming from the tank bay.

The round, steel hatch was clamped tightly down and I had some difficulty in getting it open. I could have done it easily enough with a hefty hammer but dared not start a commotion like that in our present position. After a good deal of fruitless pushing and shoving I kicked the thing and it flew up, nearly taking my foot off at the ankle. I climbed half-way down the ladder and then paused to shine my torch into the black depths below. It was as well that I did. At that moment the ship rolled heavily to port and the source of the noise, a ten-gallon drum of engine oil, careened across to cannon against the foot of the ladder with a resounding crash.

I pondered on the likelihood of a broken leg if I descended any further. Still, the thing could not be left to rumble from side to side with the movement of the ship. During my deliberations the drum had made several further journeys to the starboard side and back, and so I emerged on deck again to look for something to lash it down with.

Finding a handy length of line in the bosun's 'store, I poised myself again in the tank bay and succeeded, after several tries, in lassoing the drum on one of its thunderous collisions with the foot of the ladder.

The contact boats were just coming alongside as I issued from the tank bay and went to the bridge to look-out with Jacques, while Boris conducted the haggle man below for the customary transactions. Things were still very uncertain on shore, and it had been considered that a rendezvous only every three nights was the maximum risk that could be taken.

Jacques pointed out that this was all very well but, at the present rate of progress, we should end up working in the full moon period. The only answer to that seemed to be to arrange the rendezvous at places as far as possible from the customs boats' home bases. With this we had to be content, and pushed off to sea again, leaving the contact boats to make their perilous journey to the shore.

We struck a lucky spell of beautiful weather for the next two or three days and were able to lie stopped, to everybody's enjoyment and relief. The temperature of the water precluded swimming for any but the hardiest characters, and I was not one of those. Furthermore, I had no intention of revealing the unglamorous plaster

which still held me together. It had begun to itch diabolically, so much so that, at times, I feared somebody would begin to ask searching questions about my ablutionary habits.

As the third day of waiting drew to its close I handed over the deck watch to Boris and went below for a wash and brush up. We were not due to rendezvous until quite late that evening. Darkness had fallen by the time we had finished supper and I strolled out on to the foredeck.

The evening air was fresh and sharp, after the milder temperature of the daytime, and a slight breeze tugged at the tail of my duffle. I sat down on the bleached deck and looked out and away over the water. The moon was approaching full and an ever-widening stream of silver light flowed right up to the ship and enveloped her.

I sat and stared into the concentrated beauty. The *Nicotina* rolled very gently, and the water whispered along her hull. It was quiet and peaceful, with only an occasional rattle from the galley as Marie washed up. I think I came near to being hypnotised then. The world was a mass of sheer, white light. I swayed, almost unconsciously, with the movement of the ship and stared along the path of radiance. Time stood still. The moment seemed eternal.

It was shattered by Jacques's voice as he stepped out through the wheelhouse door and gave the order to start the engines. Still a little under the spell, I made my way to the engine room and pressed the starters. The resulting roars effectively brought me back to normal.

Two hours later I woke Pierre, to take over in the engine room, and esconced myself in my usual position on the bridge. As we approached the appointed bay there were a few minutes of consternation when Jacques, through his binoculars, observed another Fairmile following us. Not knowing whether it was friend or foe, we swung off course and proceeded to investigate from a discreet distance. But it was only the *Pinch of Salt*, after all, on her way to a rendezvous close to ours, and we turned back on our course.

There was a more than usually good turn out of contact boats that night, and we emptied the *Nicotina* of all the cargo she had aboard. But there was still plenty more of it on board the *Slapstick*, and we met her very early next morning to collect it. Somehow we managed to squeeze it all into the *Nicotina*, leaving Tommy with an empty ship to get away for Tangier and the next load.

Three nights later we unshipped another consignment with an

embarrassingly bright moon. The coastline was distinct and detailed in the brilliant light, and we could see for miles. Accustomed as I was to sneaking around in darkness, I found this type of exposure singularly uncomfortable. For the only time that I could remember, I wished that the *Nicotina* was not painted white. Still, it cut both ways; if we could be seen, we could also see, and extremely clearly at that.

We were all very subdued during the operation, and even the Italians in the contact boats, usually so voluble and verbose, were hushed. The cases were trans-shipped with the utmost speed and Boris went so far as to take a chance and not check the cash, in the interests of getting away as quickly as possible.

Jacques tried to urge that we rendezvous the next night, to rid ourselves of the remainder of the cargo, but the haggle man was adamant and said that the best they could do was three nights hence. Marie had reported that we were becoming very short of food and so arrangements were made for one contact boat to meet us, just outside the three-mile limit, the following night, with fresh supplies. We also requested some cans of fresh water, as one of our water tanks had sprung a leak somewhere, and we had been running exceedingly short of that vital commodity as well.

The weather had briskened up a bit by the following evening but the boat was there and the very welcome supplies were passed up to us. Fresh meat, vegetables, fruit and crisp, new bread sent Marie into ecstasies of enthusiasm, the more so as she had been reduced to feeding us on spaghetti all that day, even for breakfast.

Then, to our great delight, bottles and bottles of Chianti, tied together by their raffia handles in bunches of six, appeared in the hands of the haggle man, and were loaded reverently on to the *Nicotina*. No, they could not bring us any actual water, he told us with a grin, they just couldn't find any clean containers to put it in, so they had thought that Chianti might do instead.

It was a remarkably cheerful crew which turned the *Nicotina* out to sea once more, to wait out the last couple of days before the final rendezvous. We feasted well, those two days, and we drank even better. As there was nothing but Chianti to drink, Chianti we drank, for breakfast, elevenses, lunch and supper. Even Balik had to drink it. The days passed in a pleasant haze and the evening of the final rendezvous was upon us almost before we realised it.

Chianti-sodden, the *Nicotina* weaved her way to the appointed area in moonlight which was still disconcertingly revealing. The contact boats were over an hour late and we lay with engines silent, scanning the brightly illuminated scene around us.

Just as Jacques was about to give tongue to his impatience, we heard the faint sound of their engines, and shortly they were alongside and loading fast. With fervent thanks for the goodly supplies which they had provided, we wished them well until our next meeting, and set our course for the open sea and home.

But there was to be no next meeting, either for me or for the *Nicotina*. When she rounded Cap Ferrat and moored in Villefranche harbour the next morning, it was for the last time as a smuggler, and she never sailed with the Nicotine Navy again.

Out of Business

THE USUAL accumulation of mail was awaiting me when I went ashore, after our return to port. Amongst it were letters from my father with news that my mother was ill and, two days later, he cabled me to return to England as soon as possible.

Apart from my mother's illness, I had been abroad for the best part of two years, and a visit home was very much overdue. Immediately, I set about making arrangements, going into Nice to book a seat on the first available flight to London; now that my departure was definite I wanted to get it over as quickly as possible.

At first I believed that I would be returning, though possibly not for some months, but it quickly became apparent that this was very unlikely. A general halt had been called in the cigarette business while everyone waited to see whether the rumour of a new, faster customs boat would become reality. It did.

At once there was a rush to find something with which to meet this new hazard, and the tentative requirement for ships in the 30-knot class became an urgent necessity. The 10- to 12 knot "B" class Fairmiles were out of business.

My last night aboard the ship was an experience I would like to be able to forget. Sleep was quite beyond the realms of possibility. All night I wandered about the ship, from end to end, moving all over her in a shocked daze. I crept into the engine room and stood for a long time between the dumb, immobile engines. Then I went ashore and paced up and down the quay. For a time I stretched out on the wide harbour wall and stared out to sea with unseeing eyes; the harbour light above me, flashing its regular signal, impinged on my numbed senses. There was something hurtfully impersonal about it, emanating from the sure knowledge that the following night it would be doing its job in exactly the same way, but I would be hundreds of miles away in England.

When the colours of the morning sky had reached the height of

their flamboyancy I returned aboard and went to my cabin to change and finish packing.

I had ordered a taxi to take me to the airport and I could see it waiting for me on the other side of the harbour. I walked slowly round and got into it.

As it topped the steep climb from the harbour to the main road, running high above Villefranche, we turned left and headed in the direction of Nice. I looked down upon the little port and the lovely white ship lying alongside the quay; and I knew, with utter certainty, that I would not set foot on her decks again.

At Nice airport the authorities were loth to let me go; they accused me of not complying with the regulations regarding aliens and they maintained that I had been living in France illegally. It was complete nonsense because, as a member of a crew of a ship, living aboard, I had not been living in France at all but on British territory. This was technically correct but the officers took some convincing. Only after a long delay did they grudgingly stamp my passport and I was allowed to board the aircraft.

After take off and still climbing, we circled over Cap Ferrat and Villefranche and I had a final glimpse of the *Nicotina*, once again looking tiny and insignificant, and the words of the old Italian I had met in Porto Ercole re-entered my mind. I had indeed seen, and come to know, what was real; and I knew that I would carry the stamp of it all my life.

I left France wearing a thin dress and light coat, for it had already begun to be very warm, but as my plane crossed the English coast and flew inland towards London the Sussex countryside was thick with snow. Vaguely I anticipated catching pneumonia, but the prospect left me unmoved.

The customs man who interrogated me at London Airport looked as if he considered me quite insane to be wearing what I was, in the winter temperature there. He scuffled about in my luggage suspiciously, lugging one article of clothing after another to light and asking if it was new. Most of it was, not in the sense of being brand new, but new since I had left England two years before. After a few more questions relating to perfumes, spirits and cigarettes, he chalked me through. I replied with a particularly virtuous no to the question of whether I had any cigarettes to declare. Nor had I. My cigarette smuggling days were over.

During the ensuing months at home I was too busy and too worried to think much of the future. News filtered through to me spasmodically and none of it was good. The "B" class Fairmiles were definitely out of the game; some of them fell back on ordinary-hire work, taking out parties of tourists, but, from what I heard of it, this was not a profitable business and was also very trying work.

The *Nicotina* lay in Villefranche throughout the summer, growing barnacles and weeds galore on her bottom and slowly subsiding into a back number.

My old crew, still with Balik, had been continuing the good work in another ship, much faster than the *Nicotina*, which André and Louis had bought outright, since there were very few of that type available for charter. Other organisations turned to motor torpedo boats, motor gun boats, air/sea rescue boats or American P.T. boats, anything which could meet the speed of the new Italian customs vessel.

As was inevitable, with the increasing odds and scientific aids being introduced by the Italian customs, Jacques was eventually caught. The immediate cause had been engine failure but, as a last gesture, he had managed to ram his captors.

The story came back to me via a Frenchman, Guy, whom I had known in Villefranche. A member of our shore organisation, he used to come aboard the *Nicotina* when she was in harbour to tinker about with her radio gear. He was in England buying yet another boat to replace one which had been captured, and, over dinner, he had me spellbound with his description of Jacques's dazzling downfall.

So well known and popular had he become, during the years of successful operations, that he was almost a legend around the Gulf of Genoa and had been nicknamed "The Admiral." Nobody could believe it when the news broke that he had been caught at last; it was headlined in the newspapers and there was tremendous publicity.

In due course he came up for trial; but what a trial! The route from prison to court was lined with people, cheering and waving. The public gallery was jam-packed and, when Jacques entered the courtroom there was an uproar of riotous acclaim. Packets of cigarettes hurtled through the air and flowers rained down on him; the floor of the court was thickly littered with the evidence of his

activities and it was very obvious that, whatever the official view, public sympathy was enthusiastically with him.

Nevertheless, he stood his trial and endured his imprisonment as many a smuggler before him.

By the time my mother was fully recovered, Mike had written and said that he did not want me any more. There was no reasonably paid work to be had, only a few and very far between charter jobs, taking parties out on skin-diving trips and for under-water fishing and exploration. He was trying to sell the *Nicotina*, but the market was very flat and he was biding his time.

I had no alternative but to remain in London, take another secretarial job, and try to settle down again. I had no heart for attempting to join any other crew. My only claim was that I knew one particular type of diesels fairly well, but I had no technical qualifications with which to convince a prospective employer of my abilities in the engine room and, although females were employed aboard private yachts, it was usually in a catering capacity, or worse. I was useless as a deck hand; in my two years at sea I never did get around to learning the proper procedures with ropes and knots. Though I could guarantee to tie the ship up safely, it was by my own methods, which were generally considered to be unorthodox. Jacques had once remarked that they were highly effective but presented quite a problem when next the ship wished to leave her berth.

For months I went through life in bottom gear, eating, sleeping, travelling to and from work in the familiar, hated rat-race, trapped back into the sort of existence I had hoped never to experience again. On the underground, strap-hanging and sandwiched tightly in with the rest of the rush-hour travellers, I exuded such loathing of it all that I believe people were repelled away from me by the sheer, invisible strength of it.

Fortunately, my new job was with a small motor firm whose boss was a personal friend of mine. This was extremely lucky for me, for he knew the circumstances in which I had spent the previous two years, and he was incredibly tolerant of my moods, far more so than any stranger would have been.

When the final blow came, it was my new boss who broke it to me. Sitting in his car as we were driving through Kensington one wintry morning, he told me he had received news that the *Nicotina* had been sunk.

Briefly, some time during the summer, Mike had taken her to Tangier, in the hopes of finding work there. In the late autumn he had left her in the hands of an agent and had returned home himself to try and make arrangements to sell her. But whatever success he might or might not have had, the whole matter was taken out of his hands.

Some time after his return to England she was moved to another port for inspection by a prospective buyer and there, one night, a gale had sprung up suddenly, as they do in that part of the world, without warning. She had dragged her anchor and hit some rocks, damaging herself fatally.

Long afterwards, her log came into my possession, and the last six entries must serve to tell the story of her final hours :

- 0215. Wind S.W. Force 8. Ship started to drag anchor. Engines unable to get started. Mate swam ashore.
- 0300. R.A.F. arrived. Doing O.K. till rope broke.
- 0430. Navy arrive, can't shift us. We grounded just before they arrived.
- 0600. Ship holed badly along p/side. Aft compts. flooded. Engine room awash and water creeping forward.
- 0605. Preparing to abandon ship. Awaiting instructions.
- 0618. Received instructions to abandon ship.

In my own mind, her end was a straightforward, simple suicide and, when she sank, a part of me went down with her as a ransom which can never be paid off

I was sufficiently unbalanced in my love of the *Nicotina* to believe that, in a strange and inexplicable way, she also had some feeling for me. We were never closer than in the long night watches, as she rolled her way along and I sat at the top of the engine-room hatch and listened to my engines talking together.

She has been on the bottom for the best part of a decade, now. When I had finally accepted the fact that she was gone, I determined that one day, perhaps a long way into the future, I would have a ship of my own, maybe not exactly like her, but a ship capable of deep sea-going, which would give me back the life I had lived and loved, in the *Nicotina*, and lost.

A small degree of consolation exists in the fact that she is not living

out her life rotting and neglected, as do so many of her contemporaries.

Along the river banks from where she first came into being many of her sister ships are moored in a trail of dry rot and deterioration. Some are used as houseboats, some just dumped and forgotten. One gutted hulk still swings at anchor in a small port in Eire. Others are ploughing their dreary, commercial way from pier to pier, carrying trippers. Two are in service as ferries between the mainland and an island off the coast of Italy, and others are plodding amongst the Greek islands, carrying cargoes of oranges and goats. A few, more fortunate, are used as training ships by Sea Cadets and suchlike organisations.

In the harbours of the French and Italian Rivieras are the ones which were bought by the well-to-do and fitted out as luxury yachts. They lie in port, for the most part unused. Their owners found out too late, after they had carried out exotic conversions, that these little ships were built for the sea-farer and the sea-fighter, and not for the amusement of those with weak stomachs.

In many strange and far-flung places they can be found, but of the *Nicotina* there is nothing.

Perhaps, on one of those clear, Mediterranean days when the sea is glassily calm, catching a pale reflection of the sunlight way down in the deepening greenness, you may see the shifting outlines of a long, white hull.

Or again, on a velvet dark night, when there are neither moon nor stars, as you steam on your lawful way through the Gulf of Genoa with lights glowing, you may see a dim shadow stealing quietly across the water towards the shore, or racing out to sea again with a shouting of engines and a screaming of superchargers. And she will show no lights.

If you have the misfortune to be caught in a mistral in the Gulf of Lyons, you may catch a glimpse of her, thrown high on the crest of a watery mountain then disappearing into a crevasse of boiling, seething, white-lashed sea, her crew fighting to keep their feet as they take their turn at the wheel, her engineers skidding about an engine room which is a shrieking nightmare of noise, heat, violent movement and the treachery of oil on linoleum.

But all these things are only for those to see who understand, and the *Nicotina* sleeps at the bottom of the Mediterranean. . . .